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ABSTRACT

This report describes a study of the dynamic between selected reform support organizations (RSOs) and the school districts they have partnered with to promote educational reform. The report is directed toward the needs and interests of district leaders and was designed to help them understand district/RSO relationships so they can make informed decisions about collaborating with external organizations. The study examined why districts choose to partner with an RSO, the nature of the engagement, expectations, interim results, key factors in the development of a relationship that promotes change, and elements of the interaction that lead to sustainable improvement. A total of 24 organizations were profiled (profiles are available at http://www.schoolcommunities.org/portfolio). Five of those organizations are reviewed in this report. The report begins with a discussion of the nature of relationships between RSOs and districts, followed by brief profiles of the collaborative effort between the district and RSO. The findings are then discussed and are followed by a set of practical questions to ask about partnerships with external organizations. The report concludes with some brief suggestions about possible lines of further inquiry. (Contains a list of 37 references and resources.) (WFA)

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Reforming Relationships:

School Districts, External Organizations, and Systemic Change

Report by Robert A. Kronley and Claire Handley, Kronley & Associates
for School Communities that Work:
A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

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SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK

An Initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

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School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

was established in 2000 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, to examine an element of the public education system that has often been overlooked: the urban school district. Its primary goals are to help create, support, and sustain entire urban communities of high-achieving schools and to stimulate a national conversation to promote the development and implementation of school communities that do, in fact, work for all children.

To help imagine what high-achieving school communities would look like and how to create them, the Task Force convened influential leaders from the education, civic, business, and nonprofit communities to study three critical areas: building capacity for teaching and learning; developing family and community supports; and organizing, managing, and governing schools and systems.

The Task Force commissioned Kronley & Associates of Atlanta to study organizations involved in supporting educational reform, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between these organizations and their district partners.

School Communities that Work Task Force Core Group

- Deanna Burney
  Education Consultant
  Haddonfield, New Jersey
- Geoffrey Canada
  Rheedlen Center for Children and Families
- Thomas Corcoran
  Consortium for Policy Research in Education
- Roger Erskine
  League of Education Voters (Seattle)
- Norm Fruchter
  New York University
- Eugene Garcia
  Arizona State University
- Ellen Guiney
  Boston Plan for Excellence
- Antonia Hernandez
  Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
- Paul Hill
  University of Washington
- Gregory Hodge
  California Tomorrow
- Diana Lam
  New York City Department of Education
- Don McAdams
  Center for Reform of School Systems
- Milbrey McLaughlin
  Stanford University
- Richard P. Mills
  New York State Education Department and State University of New York
- Hugh Price
  Former President and CEO
  National Urban League

FOUNDING CHAIRMAN

Thomas G. Labrecque *(deceased)*

EX OFFICIO

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Carnegie Corporation of New York

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Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Marla Ucelli, Director
School Communities that Work
Annenberg Institute for School Reform

ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM STAFF

Ellen Foley, Principal Associate

Susan Fisher, Associate Director, Communications

Margaret Balch-Gonzalez, Editor

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For more information on the School Communities that Work Task Force, visit our Web site at www.schoolcommunities.org

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Foreword

In fall 2002, SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK, the Annenberg Institute's National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, described a new conception of high-performing communities of schools that ensure both results and equity for all children. In creating this vision of "school communities that work," Task Force members acknowledged that no urban school system is currently organized to be the kind of "smart district" that they envision.

Central to the design of a smart district is the notion that it would incorporate some of the functions of a traditional district, eliminate others, and involve a much wider spectrum of community members, organizations, and agencies than is typically the case now. The Task Force believes that school districts currently *cannot* and, indeed, *should not* provide all the educational and social supports children and youth need to achieve both results and equity. Many different individuals and organizations – including schools, parents and families, civic groups, research groups, nonprofits, community and faith-based organizations, private-sector companies, and city agencies – must work together to support and sustain the healthy learning and development of children and youth.

The Task Force asked Kronley & Associates of Atlanta to look at an important but understudied slice of the local education support pie: reform support organizations, or RSOs, and especially the *relationship* between RSOs and their district partners. The term *reform support organization* (which was developed for this analysis) includes a range of organizations external to a school district – public, quasi-public, private for-profit, and private nonprofit – that seek to engage or are engaged by school districts in efforts at systemic reform. This report – *Reforming Relationships: School Districts, External Organizations, and Systemic Change* – examines several RSO/reforming-district pairings, illuminating the reasons for and the expectations, dynamics, and interim results of those relationships.

Our aim in commissioning this study was to help district leaders understand the potential and pitfalls of district/RSO relationships so they might make more informed decisions about collaborating with external organizations. In addition to district leaders, the study is also relevant to philanthropic funders (who played a key role in each of the "reforming relationships" in the study); to policy-makers

Simply defining what makes a district "smart" is not enough, so School Communities that Work devoted much of the first phase of its work to developing a set of interrelated frameworks, tools, and other resources to help districts make the transition to a new and much needed kind of "local education support system." This *Portfolio for District Redesign* is available to any interested districts and their local partners (ordering information is available on the Web at www.schoolcommunities.org or by calling 401 863-2018).

Beginning in 2003, the Task Force is taking the next step, launching partnerships with several districts and organizations. Our goal is to use the *Portfolio*'s tools and the expertise of our members to help districts and communities get smart – to bring about the kind of schooling that enables all young people to grow up to become knowledgeable, productive, and caring adults.

seeking a deeper understanding of the levers and possible partners for improving large numbers of schools; to researchers contributing to the field's understanding of not just the "what" but also the "how" of building sustainable, scaleable capacity for better teaching and learning; and, of course, to the growing number of RSOs themselves.

Many thanks on behalf of the Task Force to authors Robert Kronley and Claire Handley for bringing definition and description to this important group of organizations and for shining an early light into a territory clearly worthy of more extensive examination. Their findings will be of continuing relevance in our and others' efforts to create whole communities of successful schools.

Marla Ucelli
Director
School Communities that Work

Acknowledgments

Marla Ucelli, who directs the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, conceived the idea that resulted in this analysis. Marla and her colleagues, notably Ellen Foley, provided insight and support along with enthusiasm and gentle prodding. We are grateful for all their help.

This study would not have happened without the ongoing input of district leaders and their staffs. They sat patiently through meetings and interviews and provided significant perceptions about what constitutes relationships between districts and reform support organizations. RSO staffs were similarly forthright in their responses to continuing questions. We also appreciate the comments of a group of foundation executives and RSO representatives who reacted to an early draft of the report and participated in a meeting convened by the Task Force to discuss it with us. We hope that this analysis will be useful to all of them.

Finally, the utility of a study like this one depends on finding information, reviewing materials, and listening sensitively to the reflections of others. We appreciate the contributions of Susan Snyder, who worked with us on this project before returning to the practice of law in Boston.

Robert A. Kronley
Claire Handley
Kronley & Associates

Reforming Relationships

Summary of Findings

Context for Engagement

1. Reform support organizations are either local, with established roots in the district and a mission to serve it, or "imported" organizations, which function independently of a specific community; this distinction substantially shapes the relationship between an RSO and a district and directly influences many of the subsequent findings.

2. Almost all RSOs operate pursuant to stated beliefs, which lead to distinctive approaches to reform; imported organizations vary significantly in their willingness and capacity to expand their approaches to meet multiple or shifting district needs.

3. District/RSO partnerships can energize educators, support and engage diverse talent and skills, and identify latent capacities in segments of school and district staff; this occurs regardless of the theory behind or content of any specific approach to reform.

4. Local and national foundations play an ongoing and critical role in establishing, defining, nurturing, and maintaining district/RSO partnerships and, in doing so, function as a type of reform support organization; without their commitment, many partnerships would founder.

5. Powerful remnants of racial discrimination significantly influence aspects of the educational issues that districts face but are often only indirectly addressed in the district/RSO relationships and the reform strategies that they embrace.

Making It Work

6. The superintendent's vision must animate the district/RSO relationship; without this vision and a continually evolving and shared understanding of how the RSO's efforts further it, the reform will not succeed.

7. Resistance to reform is always present; superintendents must unequivocally associate themselves with the reform and continually embrace the implementation strategies of the RSO.

8. Superintendent leadership and district buy-in is not enough; comprehensive efforts to involve all stakeholders (board, community, families, and unions) must begin early and continue throughout the reform work.

9. The superintendent cannot function in isolation; she must empower district staff to champion and help drive the reform.

10. RSO approaches to reform often focus either on creating structures or on improving teaching and learning; these are equally important and districts are becoming more cognizant of how one should lead to the other.

11. There has been little focus on assessing the contributions of both local and imported RSOs in improving student achievement; this is beginning to change as districts feel increased pressure as a result of new standards and as RSOs become more reflective about their work.

12. Local RSOs are continually challenged to develop new capacities to meet changing district needs; imported organizations constantly work to add value as their reform takes hold in districts.

Sustaining Reform

13. Systemic reform requires more than the assistance of one RSO, local or imported; districts depend on a wide range of organizations for critical, though not necessarily systemic, support.

14. Sustaining reform is primarily a local endeavor that involves district persistence, local capacity, and adequate resources; in sustaining reform, an imported RSO's greatest value may be its ability to help build local capacity and to ask hard questions about progress.

15. Measures of interim success vary but include a common language, new roles, and a recognition that what began as an innovation has become a habit of being.

16. Most RSOs "push" the district to reform; the potential contributions of advocacy organizations that "demand" reform also require attention and support.

Introduction: Supporting Systemic Reform

School districts today face growing pressure – from federal and state agencies, communities, the media, and parents – for improved student achievement. Regardless of where the demand comes from, it is clear that previously accepted levels of student performance, typically ranging from average to poor except for selected groups of students, will no longer be tolerated. Districts that do not meet goals mandated by public agencies now face severe penalties; they may lose funding or be subject to corrective action, including a state-takeover.[1]

Improving student achievement and maintaining it at mandated levels require districts to reform themselves in fundamental ways – a complex and often convoluted process that requires, minimally, a vision of change; investment of considerable time and resources, both human and financial; and sustained will. As districts have attempted reform over the past decade, they have come to understand – along with community leaders, policy-makers, and educational researchers, experts, and practitioners – that the systemic reform they seek surpasses the capacity within the district itself.[2] Districts, if they are to meet the goals established by state and federal policies and improve achievement and outcomes for all students, need help. Increasingly, they are reaching outside the confines of their systems to get it.

More and more, school districts are exploring and entering into relationships with outside organizations specifically to develop, implement, and sustain systemic reform. There have long been organizations that support schools and districts. Businesses frequently partner with schools.[3] Parent and community organizations often have a strong presence in buildings, contributing not only in classrooms as tutors but also on school councils that make policy decisions. A variety of local organizations provide critical support to teachers as they seek new teaching strategies or curricula.

However, the external organizations that engage and support districts in systemic reform are different. Their goals are different and the activities that they undertake are different. Furthermore, the nature of the reform process – time- and labor-intensive;

[1] See, for example, the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education 2002).

[2] All the superintendents interviewed for this study expressed the belief that neither their own districts nor any other had the capacity to undertake systemic reform on their own. The literature supports this. According to Stone (2001), "[Fundamental] reform never comes from people who are engaged in running routine operations." Honig (2001) concurs. "Complex policy strategies generally exceed the capacity of policy makers for implementation."

[3] See, for example, information about the U.S. Chamber of Commerce School-to-Career Project (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Center for Workforce Preparation, n.d.).

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often erratic, with progress in one area offset by stagnation or even setbacks in others; and set against a constantly shifting context – requires that external organizations involved in systemic reform have different relationships with schools and districts.

In the 1990s, many of these external organizations were created; others developed out of existing but more narrowly focused organizations. Many have assumed substantial roles in district reform efforts around the country. In some cases they have been pushed to prominence by the Annenberg Challenge, the multiyear, multisite systemic reform initiative supported by $500 million from the Annenberg Foundation.

District need, organizational response, and philanthropic investment have resulted in increasing awareness of and interest in these organizations. However, in-depth knowledge about them is limited; the research about them is, like the organizations themselves, relatively new and still evolving.

The recent advent of these organizations, the emerging and varied nature of their roles in systemic reform, and the limited research into their work has led to some confusion. There is not even a widely accepted label for them yet. In much of the literature and among many individuals and institutions interested in or participating in reform, these external organizations are referred to as *intermediaries*. What they mediate and whom they come between, however, is not always clear.

The philanthropic community, which has provided considerable support to these organizations[4] (in addition to the substantial investment by the Annenberg Foundation), sometimes views them as mediating between foundations and the districts to which the foundations provide assistance in undertaking reform.[5] Others define them as membership organizations, consisting of "representatives from sites, policy-making bureaucracies, elected bodies, and private organizations," who mediate between policy-makers and implementers (Honig 2001). The mediation contemplated here seems to be primarily between district-level policy-makers and school faculty or "frontline" district personnel who work closely with school sites.

Cohen (2000) describes intermediaries as "independent bodies comprised of multiple stakeholders (school insiders and outsiders) to push systems to change both from within and without" and suggests that these bodies not only connect schools to district administration but schools and districts to the larger political context in which they function. A third source, self-identifying as an intermediary, defines an intermediary as a "third-party organization, at once situated outside of schools and school districts but working intensively inside schools and districts to promote change" (French 2001, citing M. McLaughlin and B. Neufeld).[6]

These are useful definitions; mediating is an important component of the work that these organizations undertake.[7] These definitions, however, arise

[4] The Hewlett Foundation has, for example, invested over $30 million in the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative since 1995.

[5] The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, established the Learning Communities Network in 1995 in part to link the Foundation to the districts involved in its systemic reform initiative as well as to provide technical assistance to the districts.

[6] Stone (1998), in a discussion on building civic capacity, implies a view of the work of stakeholders (whom he defines as, among others, parents, business, local government, and other community-based actors, which would presumably include intermediaries) that is broader than mediation. He proposes that not only can stakeholders hold educators accountable for student performance, they can provide meaningful resources and other supports to educators in their work to improve student learning.

[7] Definitions of *intermediary* also appear to be highly contextual. When the Chicago Annenberg Challenge (CAC) was formed, Chicago Public Schools was a highly decentralized system. The reform plan the CAC crafted reflected this decentralization, and intermediaries in Chicago conform to a definition that emphasizes work with schools: "university- or community-based external partners linked to networks of schools" (Newmann & Sconzert 2000).

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from observations of the work of organizations that are based in the districts they seek to engage. Yet many organizations that collaborate with school districts in systemic reform are not located in the same communities as the districts they assist.

The literature makes clear that even the activities of the locally based groups go far beyond mediation or building links between levels of public entities or between public and private entities. These organizations serve multiple roles that include, among other things, advocacy, technical assistance, fund-raising, research, and evaluation. They assume these and other functions because, like their counterparts located outside the districts, they seek not only to bridge gaps between schools, districts, and other agencies, but also to build the capacity of schools and districts to pursue, foster, and sustain systemic reform. The concept of capacity building is central to the work of many of these organizations and links the multiple and diverse functions they may provide to a district.

An alternative to the term intermediary may be helpful in considering the work of these organizations and their interaction with districts. One that seems to capture the breadth and scope of the work these organizations undertake is "reform support organization." Reform support organizations (RSOs) include a range of outside organizations – public, quasi-public, private for-profit, and private nonprofit – that seek to engage or are engaged by school districts in efforts at systemic reform.

It is clear that, given the relatively broad range of groups that might fall under the umbrella of reform support organizations, very different relationships will develop between these external groups and a school district. In proffering the term "reform support organization," we are not suggesting that the concept of "support" in this context implies a hierarchal relationship between the district and the RSO. What is being "supported" is a process of transformation that will lead to better outcomes for students; in the dynamic that is central to this process, both the district and RSO will serve as "supports" for each other.[5]

While the literature, which is not yet extensive, may be somewhat imprecise in defining these external organizations, or RSOs, it does capture the complexity of their work and the range of skills and knowledge that they need. Neufeld and Guiney (2000) suggest that RSOs must be flexible and reflective learning organizations that have or possess the willingness to gain in-depth knowledge of or access to experts in, among other things, effective instructional practices (pedagogy and content), assessment, adult learning, data collection, management, analysis, and leadership development. RSOs require these attributes and this knowledge because the roles they assume – within districts and outside

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

We define *systemic reform* as engagement by the district or at the district level in a manner geared to build capacity that will lead to sustainable improvement at many, if not all, schools in a system.

The term *reform support organization* and the attendant definition were developed for this analysis by the staff of SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK and by the authors.

[5] This caution against an inference of a pecking order is most applicable to RSOs that are based in the districts that they seek to reform (see the discussion about "local" and "imported" organizations). Local RSOs often have significant resources and derive power and influence from individuals and institutions that are not formally connected to, or in many instances, dependent on, the district. To consider their efforts as limited to "supporting" the *district* as opposed to participating in a process of *reform* would scant their role. In supporting *reform*, these RSOs serve in numerous ways – as partners, consultants, and critical friends, among others.

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of them – are multiple. They are teachers, facilitators, negotiators, and advocates, brokering and sustaining relationships between public and private agencies, institutions, and organizations.[9]

About This Study

Much remains to be learned about RSOs. A large part of the current understanding of RSOs stems from close review of individual RSOs (often referred to in the reviews as intermediaries), especially those that participated in the Annenberg Challenge. Preliminary investigations suggest that the configuration of RSOs, the specific activities they undertake, and how they choose to take them affect their ability to engage and work with school districts in systemic reform efforts (Cohen 2000). Researchers are also beginning to consider the *results* of district/RSO relationships. They have focused, for the most part, on how processes within districts and schools have changed, how contexts have changed, and how adult knowledge and skills have improved.[10]

One area that has not yet been explored meaningfully is the *relationship* itself between RSOs and districts.[11] The relationship between an RSO and a district is distinct from its structure, activities, culture, and context, although it is shaped by those characteristics. The relationship is fundamentally about human interactions – learning to listen, disagreeing respectfully, taking risks, developing trust, and forging solid alliances that lead to positive and sustainable change. The nature of the relationship is at the core of the shared reform enterprise that connects districts to external organizations.

This study explores the dynamic between selected RSOs and the school districts they have partnered with to promote reform. It looks at why districts chose to partner with an RSO, the nature of the engagement, expectations, interim results, key factors in the development of a relationship that promotes transformation, and elements of the interaction that will lead to sustainable improvement. It is geared foremost to the needs and interests of district leaders and seeks to help them understand district/RSO relationships so they can make informed decisions about collaborating with external organizations.

In focusing on the interests and needs of district leaders, this report also recognizes that multiple levels of leadership are required to transform school districts. There are several key actors – school board members, other elected and appointed officials, union representatives, civic and business leaders – whose ongoing and active participation is critical to developing and sustaining reform. As a result, they form relationships with RSOs. Some of these relationships are connected to and derive from the relationship with the superintendent and some of them are independent of the superintendent or the central office. These relationships vary in regularity,

[9] Cohen (2000) concurs, citing five roles that RSOs (she uses "intermediaries") hold: champions of reform (sharpening vision and focusing efforts); educators (providing training and assistance); program developers (investigating new ideas); management coaches (assisting implementation challenges); and political advocates (pressuring systems to be more hospitable to reform).

[10] This was due, at least in part, to the request by the Annenberg Challenge that evaluations of Challenge sites include not only student outcomes but also instructional practices and climate, school networks, RSOs' relationships to districts, and the relationships of RSOs and districts to the community. These evaluations, some of which show evidence of improved student performance, are available on the Web at http://www.annenbergchallenge.org/evaluation/eval_evidence.html. Beyond these evaluations, however, the various studies cited here (e.g., Neufeld & Guiney 2000 and Cohen 2000) and others (e.g., Neufeld & Woodworth 2001) suggest that it is important to study changes in school, district, and RSO infrastructure, processes, context, and adult knowledge and skills, since these are requisite steps to improving student achievement.

[11] Neufeld and Guiney (2000) allude to the dynamic of building and sustaining the relationship between an RSO and a district but focus on the capacities the RSO has to develop to function effectively, given that originally the RSO had a narrower mission and hence limited knowledge, skills, and experience.

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intensity, and significance and call for further analysis in the context of specific district experiences. Our primary concern here, however, is the relationship between the superintendent and RSOs.

The first task in this study was to determine the types of organization that would be the subject of the analysis. There are many organizations external to schools and school districts that might be classified as promoting reform. We concluded that the analysis would embrace those organizations that are pursuing systemwide change and that seek to build or enhance the capacity of district personnel to realize change on the district level.

In addition, we determined that the study would be limited to organizations whose work involves formal collaboration with a district.[12] For the purposes of this investigation, promoting systemic reform necessitates some sort of structured relationship with a district that will lead to agreed-upon activities or results. Requiring defined (albeit loosely, in some instances) collaborations with the central office limits the universe of reform groups subject to the analysis. It focuses the investigation on organizations that support capacity building, which will lead to systemic change, rather than on organizations that primarily encourage the system from a distance to adopt specific policies or programs or to support change that is limited to one or a handful of schools.[13] The organizations reviewed in this study then work with district leaders to help create the conditions and mobilize and support efforts to improve schools and school systems.

We reviewed relevant literature and held informal discussions with colleagues and others knowledgeable about district reform and about the purposes and activities of external organizations working with districts. We also drew on our knowledge and that of Annenberg Institute staff to help identify organizations that were candidates for inclusion in the study. Superintendents and other educators working in urban school districts were queried about the reform support organizations they worked with. About fifty reform support organizations were identified for possible profiling. This group was winnowed by excluding organizations whose work with districts was not focused on systemwide reform and by eliminating partnerships between the RSO and the district that were in early stages. Twenty-four organizations were scanned and profiled; profiles of these groups are available on the SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK Web site at <http://www.schoolcommunities.org/portfolio >.

From the organizations profiled, four were selected for more in-depth review:

- The Busara Group, a fee-for-service organization that provides technical assistance to districts pursuing reform. Among other areas, Busara has expertise in budgeting and contracts; human resources, including professional development; communications; strategic planning; and standards development. Busara has worked in a number of urban districts including Charlotte; Denver; Flint; Jackson, Mississippi; Miami; San Juan, Puerto Rico; Santa Ana, California; and Washington, D.C.

[12] This does not preclude the analysis of organizations that formally collaborate with districts but that focus their attention and resources on a cluster of schools, based on the presumption that successful reform throughout the cluster will inform a districtwide reform initiative.

[13] There is another cluster of organizations – advocacy groups – that support systemic reform by demanding that districts change. Advocacy groups bring attention to the need for reform. They also generate support for the reform and, often, for the organizations that help districts implement reform as well. The presence of advocacy groups in districts may be a crucial factor in promoting systemic change but they are beyond the scope of this study. The activities of the organizations included in this analysis, centered primarily around supporting districts in their efforts to change, require close collaboration with the district.

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- The Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR), a nonprofit, fee-for-service group that partners with school districts to build and improve their capacity to undertake systemic reform grounded in the belief that student work is the core business of schools. CLSR has worked with numerous school systems including such urban districts as Atlanta; Birmingham; Canton, Ohio; and Durham, North Carolina.
- The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), which conceived and operates the First Things First education reform initiative. First Things First is a research-based, comprehensive framework that seeks to build positive relationships among educators, students, and families through the implementation of specific school structures; to promote effective teaching methods; and to realign resources in support of districtwide reform efforts. Funded by foundations and federal grants, IRRE is currently working with school districts in Houston; Kansas City, Kansas; the Mississippi Delta; and River View Gardens, Missouri.
- The Public Education Foundation of Chattanooga (PEF), a local education fund that provides strategic support to the Hamilton County, Tennessee, school district through comprehensive reform initiatives. PEF conceives, develops, and implements programs that are designed to help all students succeed in school and to encourage the community's faith in and support for the public schools in the district. It works to strengthen leaders, reconfigure schools, empower teachers, and engage families. The Foundation's efforts are supported by public and private grants and by the income from its endowment.

In addition to the four organizations described above, we also looked at the work of multiple RSOs in Cleveland, Ohio. In Cleveland, there is a long history of interactions among an urban school system that has undergone substantial change in the last decade; several nonprofit organizations, including those created by business leaders, a local education fund, and others with specific programmatic expertise; and a group of foundations devoted to improving outcomes for students by providing continuing financial support and advice to both the district and the external organizations. The shifting dynamics that make up the relationships among these actors provide insight into how RSOs' work with a district can evolve. Recently, in accordance with the CEO's (superintendent's) vision of consolidating various RSOs' efforts into a comprehensive reform agenda, two of these RSOs have merged, with one of them, the Cleveland Initiative for Education, emerging as the major locus of school reform. Another of the original RSOs has ceased operations in Cleveland.[14]

SUMMARY OF THE PARTNERSHIPS STUDIED IN DEPTH

RSO	DISTRICT
The Busara Group	Flint (MI) Community Schools
The Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR)	Durham (NC) Public Schools
The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE)	Kansas City (KS) Public Schools
The Public Education Foundation of Chattanooga (PEF)	Hamilton County (TN) Public Schools
Multiple RSOs, initially Cleveland Initiative for Education (CIE) after consolidation of RSO reform efforts	Cleveland (OH) Municipal School District

[14] For a more detailed description of the latest developments in Cleveland, see Kronley & Handley 2003.

Organizations (other than those in Cleveland and Chattanooga) selected for in-depth review were asked to suggest a district where their work could be studied (see sidebar for a summary of the five partnerships that were studied in depth). All of the districts in the study displayed characteristics of large urban districts – a large representation of low-performing students, significant numbers of students from low-income families, concern about the advent of standards-based reform, and other unresolved issues arising out of a legacy, often mandated by policy, of racial discrimination.

Despite some real similarities in the districts where they worked, the organizations differed considerably from each other in how they were created, what they believed, what their operating principles were, how they were funded, to whom they related in a district, and how they related to them. There were also key differences in organization, the nature of organizational expertise, the expectations that led to partnerships, and the way each RSO believed its contributions to district reform might be assessed. Each RSO in this study was unique. Given the small number of organizations treated here, none should be considered as "representative" of a type or class of RSOs.

Detailed interviews were conducted with leaders from each of the RSOs under review. Their staffs then approached district leadership about the analysis and facilitated an introduction to the leadership. Case studies for each of the five districts and their relationships with the RSOs were developed.[15] The in-depth studies relied primarily on the collection and analysis of qualitative data from each of the sites, including interviews with key informants (suggested by both the district and the RSO) as well as observations of activities in and outside classrooms and meetings. (See pages 64–65 for a list of interviewees.) Time on-site varied between three and five days. Common interview protocols served as a guide for investigators in each district. In addition, the investigators reviewed available materials on the district, the RSOs, their joint work, and any assessments of it.

This analysis begins with a discussion about the nature of relationships between RSOs and districts, followed by brief profiles of the collaborative effort between the district and the RSO. (Readers desiring more detail are referred to the case studies.) The findings are then discussed and are followed by a set of practical questions to ask about partnerships with external organizations, which is offered as a guide for district leadership seeking to engage RSOs. The analysis concludes with some brief suggestions about possible lines of further inquiry.

Pursuing Partnerships

This section provides an overview of notable aspects of the relationship between districts and reform support organizations. (See the next section for a closer look at how these and other elements play out in the specific contexts of five districts.) Our scan of twenty-four RSOs suggests that there are significant differences among RSOs; their origin, purposes, and modes of operations diverge, as do expectations, beliefs, and budgets. There are cohorts within the larger array of reform support organizations whose members prominently display common attributes, but there are equally strong differences within each of the cohorts.

Recent analyses suggest that professional development for educators shows "more of the characteristics of an uncharted frontier than those of a coher-

[15] For more information about the case studies, contact the District Redesign initiative, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, Box 1985, Providence, RI 02912. Telephone 401 863-1897.

ent field" (Kronley & Handley 2001).[16] This may also be true of the efforts of the diverse organizations that support school districts in systemic reform. The disjointed and fluid nature of this emerging domain provides more than a set of obstacles for analysts; it presents district leadership with challenges about how to structure and mold relationships with reform support organizations in ways that will lead to measurable improvement in the district's capacity to bring about reform.

The Context for Reform: Relationships at the Core

Districts invest significant resources in collaborations with RSOs because district leaders believe that these collaborations will lead to positive and lasting change. This focused interest of the district and the elastic and evolving sphere of reform support organizations suggest that there may be ways of exploring how RSOs influence systemic change that are equally useful and less obvious than comparing and contrasting specific attributes of the various types of groups that comprise a large and relatively undefined universe of organizations.

RSOs do not operate in a vacuum. Understanding RSOs and their implications for sustainable systemic improvement means appreciating how they relate to districts. In this approach, RSO characteristics are significant to the degree that they inform relationships with the district.

Local and Imported RSOs

Our analysis reveals that the most significant RSO characteristic affecting its relationship with a district is whether the organization is local (based in the district and focusing primarily, if not exclusively, on supporting the reform efforts of this district) or imported (located outside the district with which it is engaged and usually assisting several districts simultaneously). Each provides specific strategic opportunities for a district. These distinct opportunities lead to different patterns of engagement, different expectations, and different working relationships.

Local organizations are embedded in the community. This helps define the nature of the work they do, the approach they take to the work, and the way in which the school district relates to them. Local organizations, at the start of a relationship, have had more contact over time with the district than imported organizations. Members of their boards or staffs often have a history of longstanding and complex interactions with district personnel. Districts are similarly involved with local RSOs; it is not unusual for the superintendent to sit on the board of a prominent RSO. These connections in many instances result in intimate knowledge of the community's educational issues and engender well-formed and strongly held ideas about educational needs and how to meet them.

Familiarity with and commitment to improving conditions in their communities impart legitimacy to the work of local RSOs that differs from that of imported organizations, whose reputations grow out of their national experience and the recognition that comes from it. In implementing their approaches to systemic reform, many local organizations develop an array of programs, in many cases supported by outside funding, to respond to a district's changing needs.

There is typically a different engagement process for local as opposed to imported organizations. Given local RSOs' close relationships with community leaders and their dependence on district cooperation to secure program funding, districts may be reluctant to refuse a local group's offer of assistance. Districts may also wish to avail themselves of the funding and recognition that partnerships with local RSOs bring. Programmatic opportunities that

[16] See also Kronley, "From Frontier to Field," 2000.

exist independently of a coherent plan for reform may influence or shape some district/local RSO relationships and may become the foundation of such reform plans. In these kinds of arrangements, expectations of both parties about purpose, duration, level, and extent of district participation, scale, and sustainability may not be clear at the outset.

On the other hand, the district may attempt to initiate collaboration with a local organization to meet a specific need that it has identified. In some cases, the district does so because it has prior experience with the RSO, is aware of its work, and is assured that RSO beliefs and capacity are aligned with district expectations. In other instances, the district that is seeking assistance prefers to have it provided locally and will engage a local RSO even if it has not previously collaborated with it. These engagements sometimes lead to questions about the RSO's capacity. Some of the capacity questions may be addressed when the district/RSO relationship is supported or brokered by a third party, often a local business or foundation. Beyond concerns about capacity, questions may arise about how well expectations on the part of all three organizations (broker, district, and local support group) are aligned.

Sometimes a district chooses to partner with an imported organization. In these instances, the district often is seeking to resolve an issue, or a number of issues, that are not amenable to a programmatic response. As need appears greater, districts may be more willing to make a commitment to working with an imported organization with a national reputation for addressing these issues. In some cases, the national organization is chosen through a process designed by the district. In others, the district may be selected, as a result of a competitive process, to participate in a reform initiative that involves substantial effort at capacity building. In still others, third parties may recommend the imported organization.

Engagement of imported organizations usually involves an expenditure of district resources (substantial funds, often from an outside funder, or time, or both) that is clear at the onset of the relationship. Given these investments, there may be, at least initially, more sustained attention paid to these relationships by district leadership. With increased attention may also come greater – if not clearer – expectations about outcomes, including sustainability and scale.

Beliefs and Programmatic Approaches

The degree to which an RSO is tied to a specific theory or approach also significantly influences the relationship. All organizations use a blend of principles, programs, and pragmatism in their work with districts. Local groups seem to rely more on an array of programs (leadership training, curriculum innovation, professional development) that, if successful, might ultimately be taken to scale throughout a district. The imported organizations in this study each embraced a specific theoretical approach and displayed substantial differences in how wedded they were to them. These approaches range from a pragmatic willingness to address problems as they surface to an insistence that the district and the RSO agree not only on beliefs, but also on operating principles that arise out of the beliefs and on structures to support the implementation of the initiative. Despite these differences, all of the imported RSOs in this study were willing, to various degrees, to modify their approaches in order to deal with issues that arose in the course of their engagement by the district.

Other Elements Influencing the Relationship

There are other elements of a district/RSO engagement that directly affect the relationship. These include:

- **Expectations.** What results does the district expect from the engagement? What products will emerge from the collaboration?

- **Funding.** Has the district invested its own funds? Is the RSO work fee-for-service? If so, who, if not the district, is paying these fees? Are foundation grants involved? Public monies in grants or contracts? If so, who is the grantee: the district, the RSO, or a third party? What is the role of the funder in advising about, implementing, or assessing the initiative?
- **Depth and reach of interventions.** Who in the district is part of the RSO work – the governing board, central office, building leaders, teachers? Are parents involved? The community? How and to what extent is each of these stakeholders involved?
- **Control exercised by the district over the RSO's intervention.** Is the district involved in the design of the reform activities? To what extent? What role does the district have in the reform's implementation?
- **Duration.** How long will the initiative last? What are the expected interim outcomes? What provision is there for midcourse changes in the initiative? Are there planned follow-up activities?
- **Assessment.** What will be assessed? When? By whom and for what purpose?

From Engagement to Trust

The foregoing elements help define the nature of the district/RSO relationship. Our detailed exploration of relationships between RSOs and five districts indicates that in many instances these relationships begin in an atmosphere of urgency that sometimes borders on crisis. The districts in this analysis displayed many of the signs that are typically associated with distressed urban systems; underperforming students, low staff morale, frequent changes in leadership, and diminished community support are prominent among them. Each was confronting a powerful legacy of racial discrimination. Two were dealing with a completed or proposed consolidation and another was under federal court supervision, which had essentially resulted in a state takeover. Two others had demonstrated a degree of dysfunction that led observers to question their ability to continue to operate independently.

Many urban districts, however, suffer from these kinds of distress. Recognition of need by the district does not define or establish the relationship; it simply provides the opportunity for the creation of a connection. For this connection to succeed in spurring systemic improvement, it needs to change not only the district, but also the way the RSO approaches the evolving context in which the district operates. District need and RSO strategies to meet these needs are, by themselves, insufficient to produce systemic change. A successful relationship requires more.

District/RSO partnerships with potential to succeed in promoting reform are built on trust. Without it, the relationship will founder and the reform will not take. The successful relationship is based on a dynamic driven by trust – trust on the part of the district that surrendering some of the defensiveness that characterizes school systems will lead to positive outcomes and trust on the part of the RSO that its capacity-building efforts will be seen as a central element in a process of experimentation and learning that are part of a continuing journey to reform.

Ideally, in this journey, reforming districts become more vulnerable and collaborative and RSOs become less certain. Districts are willing to hear, accept, and act on recommendations that come out of critical analyses of their policies and practices. RSOs are able to listen in a way that allows them to transcend the limitations of theory and adapt their approaches to the tangible and often messy realities that comprise public education today. Ideally, then, each is inclined to take measured risks to act on a shared vision of reform and each recognizes its dependence on the other as it does so.

From Risk to Reform

These risks, however, are not easily assumed. The dynamic between districts and RSOs plays out in an educational environment in which performance is measured by scores on standardized tests and accountability is driven by performance. In this environment, the commitment to long-term reform that is embedded in the relationship between a district and an RSO is itself a risky business. Districts and their supporters must constantly balance their understanding of what it takes to engender and sustain significant reform against the imperatives of policies that demand immediate positive results. Long-term reform requires time to develop and space to spread.

So, too, does the underlying relationship between the district and the RSO. Trust between the two cannot be assumed. Nor does trust appear, fully formed, overnight. Trust and the concomitant capacity to take risks to foster sustainable improvement develop unevenly. Trust leads to risk taking and capacity building, which in turn lead to greater trust, more risk taking, and more individual and institutional investment in needed capacity. This reform dynamic grows out of and continually reinforces the relationship between districts and RSOs.

As the next section demonstrates, all reforms are different and the relationships that support the reform unique. There are, however, indices of a robust interaction that reflect the development of capacities that can result in positive change. Among them are:

- **Magic moments.** It is in the nature of public systems to be wary of interaction with outside organizations. This is particularly true of school systems, and it is compounded when the system is required to admit to a problem for which it must rely on outside support to address. The recognition by the district that it cannot successfully undertake systemic reform on its own is at the core of any authentic partnership with an RSO. The district leader and her colleagues must be willing to emerge from an insular, self-protective environment and be open to new ideas, fair criticism, and different ways of doing things. For this to happen, there must be further recognition, on district stakeholders' part, that the RSO is right for them. Sometimes, this recognition is a spark that ignites instantly – when representatives of the Flint Community Schools met leaders of the Learning Communities Network (LCN – later the Busara Group), educators "felt" immediately that LCN embraced an understanding of their situation and needs.

  On the other hand, recognition that there is a "fit" may take longer. Ann Denlinger, Superintendent of Durham Public Schools, participated for almost a year in the BellSouth Foundation's Superintendents' Leadership Network, where she was regularly exposed to the work of the Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR), before she concluded that CLSR's approach would benefit her district. In Chattanooga, the incoming president of the Public Education Foundation, Dan Challener, participated in numerous meetings with local educators in part to convince them that his style was different from his predecessor's and that he could work smoothly with others concerned about education improvement. How and through what process district leaders decide, consciously or not, that an RSO is appropriate for their district varies considerably and may not, in some cases, be fully explainable. What is important is that a connection, which may have little to do with prior RSO performance, must be made for the engagement to succeed.
- **Public embrace.** Resistance to working closely with an outside organization is not limited to school leaders. It is found on every level. Once

the superintendent commits herself to collaborating with an RSO, the strength and depth of that commitment must be made clear throughout the system. Kansas City's superintendent, Ray Daniels, appeared at meeting after meeting with representatives of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education and emphasized that its reform framework, First Things First, was not a transient reform but rather was "what we do." In Durham, Denlinger made attendance at CLSR sessions part of her schedule. Her regular participation was tangible evidence of the district's commitment to reform.

- **New energy.** Part of the resistance that educators display toward reform arises out of bitter experience. Educators in every district speak derisively about one or another initiative as "the reform flavor of the month." Once it is clear, though, that district leaders firmly and unequivocally support the RSO's efforts, a group of educators often coalesces powerfully behind it. They become a first tier of support for the work of the RSO. District leadership in both Flint and Durham chose to phase reform into groups of schools over multiple years. In each district, the first groups of schools to implement reform strategies were those that volunteered; the leaders of these schools quickly grasped the potential of the reforms and their energy galvanized their faculties. In Flint, some of these schools were so eager that they got ahead of the district, asking for information on and assistance with issues before central office personnel had anticipated they would; as a result, the district was not fully prepared to supply what was requested. Given their enthusiasm, both districts' reform leaders believed that the volunteer schools would be likely to make real progress in implementation and hoped that the positive experiences of these schools would influence faculty and staff in other schools who were more skeptical of or resistant to the reforms.

What is especially interesting about these groups of first-tier supporters is that their support of a specific reform indicates their commitment to a broader transformation in the district. It seems to matter less to this leadership cadre what the elements of a specific reform are than it matters to them that the district, with clear leadership and expert support, is embarking on a long-term commitment to change. In Kansas City, educators speak of First Things First (FTF) as "common sense." In Durham, the CLSR intervention is similarly seen as providing a coherent framework for the focused commitment of educators who are willing, if not anxious, to change. A significant part of the value that RSO collaborations bring to districts is in triggering the release of latent capacity among potential leaders of change.

- **Common language.** One of the clearest manifestations of increasing depth in the district/RSO relationship is the development and use of a common language by district stakeholders. In Durham, the phrase "working on the work" has become a mantra among a significant number of educators who have adopted CLSR's belief system about a student-centered classroom focusing on engaging work for its customers – the students. Similarly, in Kansas City, throughout the district, educators speak of "support and pressure" to describe a salient feature of the FTF initiative. In Cleveland, veterans – from within and outside the district – of the struggle waged by RSOs to save the system refer to the initiatives as the work of a "government in exile."
- **Rippling ponds.** For reform to work, it cannot be limited to district leadership and a cohort of enthusiastic proponents of reform. The support, or at least the acquiescence, of the governing board is required for the reform to take root and flourish. In Flint, the board's recent hiring of a superintendent who has disavowed current

reform efforts signaled, at least indirectly, its lack of interest in continuing the relationship with the RSO. On the other hand, in Kansas City, the board's commitment to the reform was made clear when, in 1998, two years into the relationship between the district and the RSO, it probed candidates for the superintendency about their willingness to continue the engagement with the RSO.

The commitment of the board, while critical, is only part of the story. It is imperative that the reform penetrate more deeply into the system. The district and the RSO must work to engage educators whose resistance has not been overcome either by the demonstrated commitment of district leaders to the RSO or by the progress of some of their colleagues in collaborating with the RSO to bring about change. In these situations, the district and the RSO must collaborate to develop and implement mechanisms to drive the reform deeper. These include study circles, clusters, peer mentoring, and other activities to promote the RSO's work. Beyond that, districts have made personnel changes to ensure that individuals who are responsible for the reform actually support it. One example is Durham, where the superintendent has demonstrated her willingness to move nonsupportive principals out.

- **Wider support.** District/RSO collaboration is fueled by money. Successful relationships can generate more funding. In Cleveland, a number of foundations – the local Gund and Cleveland foundations, the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, and the business-backed civic improvement group, Cleveland Tomorrow – were instrumental in initiating and continuing support for RSO involvement in a district that had nowhere else to turn for the support it needed to remain viable. Investments in other district/RSO relationships from prominent funders, including the Rockefeller and Kauffman foundations, bring resources to a district and further legitimize the endeavor. In addition, significant resources not only support RSO activity, they insulate the district against critics who would question the appropriateness of investing public funds in long-term reform that appears experimental at a time when district performance is being correlated with annual results on standardized tests. In Chattanooga, multimillion dollar investments by foundations, notably the Annenberg and Benwood foundations and the Carnegie Corporation, are enabling the Public Education Foundation, which works closely with the district, to help reorganize both buildings and curricula.
- **Greater awareness.** Closely related to the legitimacy provided by outside funding is the recognition that grows out of innovative district/RSO initiatives. In Kansas City, positive articles in national newsweeklies, along with regular coverage by local dailies, have provided encouragement and validation to a district that had long been considered ineffective in educating its students. The work of RSOs and funders in setting the stage for and promoting the comeback of the district has drawn significant attention. Cleveland has experienced significant interest in its schools, while the work of the Public Education Foundation and the relationship between its leader and the Hamilton County superintendent have been held out as a model for collaborative relationships.

Positive recognition is important to the relationship between an RSO and the district. When recognition comes, however, RSOs are learning that the far greater part of it must go to the district. Seeing that the district gets the credit for progress is not only appropriate, it is essential to reinforcing the trust that is at the core of these evolving relationships.

The foregoing elements are found to different degrees in relationships between districts and RSOs. As the next section describes, their presence and significance vary with the context of district need and RSO approach.

Partnership Summaries

The following section contains summaries of the partnerships between five districts and their collaborating RSOs. Extensive narratives on these partnerships, which encompass not only descriptions of the work undertaken through the collaborations but also the development of the relationships between the RSOs and the districts, are available in case study format.[17] What follows summarizes the programs or reform strategies undertaken in each district, incorporating brief descriptions of the elements that shape the partnerships: expectations, funding, depth and reach of interventions, control exercised by the district, duration, and assessment.[18]

- **Expectations.** Each partner, as well as each funder who invested in a partnership, came to these relationships and the work undertaken in them with its own set of expectations. These expectations were highly contextual, and they were both expressed and implied. In Durham, improving educators' knowledge and skills while reshaping their vision of teaching and learning was presumed to be the key to and trigger for reform – it drove everything else the district did. In Kansas City, where expectations were most clearly articulated, a beleaguered district turned to a reform that required a reconfiguring of schools and of the central office through specific processes and structures to achieve certain conditions that the RSO held as necessary to create successful schools. Flint's expectations were different. It did not look to Busara to guide or establish the basis for its reform; rather it expected Busara to help implement certain components of it. In each of these districts – Durham, Kansas City, and Flint – the RSOs were regarded as experts in defined areas and looked to for answers in those areas.

  District leaders saw the local RSOs in Cleveland as building blocks for the district's reform plan, contributing to it – although not necessarily shaping it – and, in doing so, perhaps submerging their identities and autonomy. Hamilton County district leadership's expectations of the Public Education Foundation (PEF) are perhaps less precise. PEF is a trusted critical friend and a collaborator in reform. While it too has expertise in specific areas, its greatest value may be its willingness to take risks and its commitment to expanding its own knowledge. It may be that districts view local RSOs as skilled practitioners who can help district and school personnel *find* answers to difficult questions but who are not expected to *possess* those answers.
- **Funding.** Without exception, the funding that supports these partnerships comes from philanthropic organizations. The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, funded all of the Busara Group's work with Flint Community Schools, and the Glaxo Wellcome Foundation funded the work of the Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR) in Durham.

  Occasionally public sector monies are used. Teachers from Kansas City used a small grant from the state to visit other small learning communities. A large federal grant to the Institute for

[17] For more information about the case studies, contact the District Redesign initiative, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, Box 1985, Providence, RI 02912. Telephone 401 863-1897.

[18] These partnership summaries arise out of a review of background material and detailed interviews with RSO and district participants. This analysis is not an evaluation; it reports results, but does not assess them independently of the information provided by the collaborators.

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Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) now supports networking activities with other First Things First sites for Kansas City. The U.S. Department of Education is the primary funder of the Public Education Foundation's Teacher Quality Initiative. However, these are exceptions, not the norm.

- **Depth and reach of interventions.** Given the scope of most partnership undertakings, RSO staff work most frequently and directly with central office personnel. They often work with school site leaders – principals, teachers, or teacher teams who manage reform at the building level. In the cases of CLSR/Durham and IRRE/Kansas City, senior central office staff managed the implementation of reform on a day-to-day basis and were the primary contact for the RSOs. In its early years, teachers in the first cluster in Kansas City were familiar with Jim Connell, the founder of IRRE. In both districts, RSO staff also work with teacher leadership teams. Apart from these teams, teachers in both Durham and Kansas City today are far more familiar with the respective frameworks of the RSOs (CLSR's Working on the Work and IRRE's First Things First) than they are with the RSOs or their staff members.

  The "who" and the "how" of Hamilton County staff and faculty involvement in PEF's initiatives depend on the specific initiative. The director of the Benwood Initiative for PEF, Stephanie Spencer, works closely with the district's assistant superintendent for urban education, Ray Swofford, as well as with the principals of the nine Benwood schools. Swofford reports that he and Spencer, herself a long-time urban educator, share a vision of urban education. He has directed the Benwood principals to consider directives from her as equivalent to directives from him. Other PEF programs have much less involvement from the central office. PEF staff work directly with principals and teachers in the Community Campaign for Student Success and the Critical Friends Group programs.

  The focus also has varied among the RSOs in Cleveland. The Cleveland Initiative for Education (CIE) has worked closely with the district's central office staff, often around professional development initiatives such as the Cleveland Teachers Academy, which CIE manages. Conversely, the Cleveland Education Fund (CEF), whose programmatic focus was also professional development, worked primarily at the school level (CEF no longer works with the Cleveland Municipal School District). The Institute for Education Renewal works at both levels. Its staff work with schools engaged in whole-school reform, and, at the request of the district CEO, IER also works with central office staff to develop curriculum standards.

  The Busara Group, working in Flint, had perhaps the least public visibility in the district in which it worked. Because its areas of expertise were primarily in issues of management and finance, it worked almost exclusively with central office staff including the deputy superintendent, who was overseeing reform, and with members of the communications and finance departments.
- **Control exercised by district over partnership.** None of these districts have followed their partner RSOs blindly. Each of them has been involved in developing plans to implement reform initiatives, if not in the design of the initiatives themselves. The design and implementation of the Schools for a New Society and Benwood initiatives are the result of genuine collaboration between PEF and Hamilton County Public Schools. Some of PEF's other efforts, such as the Teacher Quality Initiative, come out of its own observations and were designed and are operated with awareness but much less active participation on the part of the district.

CLSR, while dedicated to the Working on the Work (WOW) framework, is flexible in its implementation. Ann Denlinger, Durham superintendent, and her staff determined how WOW would be implemented. IRRE's framework is much less flexible, since it calls for specific structures and has created fairly detailed processes for the planning and implementation of these structures. Kansas City district leadership, however, feels comfortable altering First Things First to meet its vision and emerging needs. The district has played an increasingly active role in the design of implementation strategies.

Busara, which does not espouse a specific educational philosophy or adhere to a specific approach to reform, has had a fairly traditional consultant/client relationship with Flint Community Schools and, therefore, the district has driven Busara's work.

District leadership's input in the work of the RSOs in Cleveland has varied over time. For much of the 1990s, the district was in such disarray that the local RSOs developed and operated programs either at the school level, with little if any input from the district central office, or they attempted larger-scale initiatives with the assistance of selected central office administrators; but there was little cohesion among these efforts. The current district CEO, who has brought greater coordination to the central office, sought a greater role in determining what the RSOs do and how they do it and successfully promoted consolidation among them.

- **Duration.** The length of each district/RSO partnership has been defined in part by whether the RSO is local or imported and in part by funding; all, however, have been multiyear. The longest partnerships are those between the local RSOs and districts (PEF and Hamilton County; the Cleveland RSOs and the Cleveland Municipal School District). These partnerships were established with the expectation that they would be long-term and, while they are dependent on outside funding, the RSOs have proven to be creative in pursuing financial support to continue their work with the districts and are not typically dependent on one funding source.

  The partnerships between the imported RSOs and districts have also been multiyear but each has operated with the awareness that the partnership will eventually come to an end, which is often tied to funding cycles. The relationship between Busara and Flint Community Schools ceased in 2002, which was the final year of the Rockefeller Foundation's grant to Flint. Durham Public Schools (DPS) will also probably not continue its partnership with CLSR following its participation in CLSR's Principals Academy, when it will have used all the funds from the Glaxo Wellcome Foundation. In both instances, it is also the case that the district leadership has little incentive to pursue additional funding to continue the partnerships. Durham's superintendent believes that DPS faculty and staff are developing the capacity to sustain WOW on their own. The new superintendent in Flint has not embraced the former superintendent's reform, so the relationship with the Busara Group is not likely to continue.

  Given the most recent grant by the Kauffman Foundation, which will fund the partnership for an additional five years, IRRE's partnership with Kansas City will last at least ten years. It is not clear at this point what will happen at the close of the current grant period – whether both parties will prolong the relationship and, if so, how the relationship will be supported.
- **Assessment.** There is considerable variation in how the districts and the RSOs evaluate the partnerships. Although the districts are increasingly bound by state and federal legislation, which

often requires specific gains in student achievement as measured by test scores, most have not attempted to link changes in student achievement to the RSOs' work. Instead, as in Durham and Flint, they monitor the RSOs' work largely by observation, feedback, and completion of agreed-upon tasks. Neither CLSR nor Busara has attempted to link their work to student outcomes.

PEF similarly has focused on monitoring the process and gathering feedback from participants as an estimation of its effect. Increasingly, however, it is incorporating specific quantifiable outcomes in its programs and seeking to gauge more systematically its contributions toward reaching those outcomes.

Operating under a theory of change, IRRE's work rests on a foundation of ongoing assessment. As a result, IRRE has developed a comprehensive array of indicators of progress – short- and long-term – as well as anticipated timelines for those indicators.

Working on the Work: Durham, North Carolina, and the Center for Leadership in School Reform

The Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR) is a nonprofit, fee-for-service organization that provides assistance to schools and school districts engaging in systemic reform. Its emphasis is on improving the knowledge and skills of teachers and building the capacity of school and district leadership so that they can better guide and support teachers.

RSO Approach

Building on the extensive research of its founder, Phillip Schlechty, CLSR believes that student work – the academic work experiences provided to students – is the core business of teachers, schools, and districts and that improving outcomes for students is dependent on improving the quality of work that is provided to them. Students, whose attendance can be mandated but whose attention must be earned, can and will learn to high levels if the work provided to them is engaging and rigorous. Teachers, schools, and districts must therefore organize their work around student work, not around the needs or desires of adults in the system. Organizing around student work requires significant change in what adults do and how they do it; these changes cannot occur unless districts have or develop the capacity to support their staffs. A district's ability to develop this capacity is dependent on its leadership and its commitment to change.

CLSR has constructed a framework, Working on the Work (WOW), to guide teachers, principals, and other faculty and staff in ensuring that students are provided work that is interesting and challenging. WOW holds that the role of teachers is to embrace, among other things, designing engaging and rigorous work for students, collaborating with colleagues to design and provide feedback on student work, continuously seeking opportunities to deepen their understanding and reflect on the qualities of engaging and rigorous student work, and continually assessing whether students are authentically engaged in their work and learning. The WOW framework also enables principals and other school and district leaders to review and redefine their roles so that they can build an infrastructure that supports teachers in creating challenging and engaging student work.

District/RSO Partnership

Dr. Ann Denlinger, Superintendent of Durham Public Schools (DPS), hired CLSR in 1998 to help implement her vision of reform. Like many urban districts, DPS had poor student test scores, a high drop-out rate, and a low graduation rate. In addition, the district had undergone a merger in 1992 between the city schools and the school system of the surrounding county, which had generated

racial tension across the community and dissension among many school faculty and staff. There had also been multiple changes in district leadership and few had confidence in the district's ability to manage its resources effectively.

Denlinger sought CLSR's assistance because she saw the WOW framework as a coherent strategy, which aligned with her own beliefs about teaching and learning, to focus every adult in the system – from teachers to central office staff to maintenance workers and bus drivers – on student work, making it the clear priority across the district. She had been introduced to CLSR through her participation in the BellSouth Foundation's Superintendents' Network, which was codesigned and coordinated by CLSR.

- **Structure.** CLSR is flexible in how WOW is implemented in a district or school and, as a result, decisions about WOW's implementation and ongoing support were typically made by DPS central office staff with advice from CLSR personnel. Denlinger and her staff, drawing on feedback from principals following a two-day introductory session on the framework, decided that WOW would be phased into schools over a three-year period. At each school, a leadership team was established to guide implementation of WOW. CLSR staff worked primarily with the school leadership teams and with key central office staff such as the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and the director of professional growth and development whose direct focus was supporting teachers and principals.

  During the first year of implementation with each cohort of schools, CLSR staff met with school leadership teams every six to eight weeks for two-day training sessions. The leadership teams, in turn, were responsible for training their colleagues. Between the training sessions, all of which were attended by Denlinger both to monitor CLSR's work and to emphasize her commitment to the WOW framework, team members were encouraged to request assistance from central office staff members, who had also been trained in WOW, or to contact CLSR staff directly; many did so. Central office staff report that team members frequently asked questions of them and they did not hesitate to e-mail or phone CLSR staff. On occasions in which central office staff could not provide the assistance team members had requested, they too did not hesitate to contact CLSR staff, who, by all accounts, responded promptly to requests. Those who were not team members had little contact with CLSR staff.

  CLSR also held periodic training for other DPS faculty and staff. These included two-day sessions for assistant principals so that they would be familiar with the framework and better able to provide on-site support to teachers in implementing it.

  During the summer of 2001, DPS sent a group of principals to CLSR's week-long Principals Academy. The Academy was an opportunity for DPS principals to deepen their understanding of WOW and its implications for them as school leaders so that they could not only better nurture its implementation but also sustain it over time. DPS is planning to send every principal to the Academy.
- **Funding.** DPS received a three-year grant of $170,000 from the Glaxo Wellcome Foundation to fund CLSR's work in the district. Without these funds, DPS would not have been able to afford CLSR.
- **Duration.** The length of CLSR's partnership with DPS has been driven in large part by availability of funding – the grant from Glaxo Wellcome. Denlinger originally anticipated that this would

be sufficient only for three years. The grant amount was not fully expended, however, enabling the district to embark on a second phase – participation in the Principals Academy. It appears unlikely that the partnership will extend beyond the second phase, given the lack of funding as well as Denlinger's estimation that the capacity of central office staff as well as school leaders has grown and that they will increasingly be better able to assume full responsibility to manage and sustain reform.

Partnership Results

There has not been a formal assessment of how CLSR's work in Durham has contributed to changes in teacher knowledge and practice or student achievement in the district. CLSR does, however, seek to gauge the value of its trainings through formal surveys and informal feedback, even soliciting opinions and suggestions during trainings to ensure that participants are engaged by and learning from them.

Although it was not clear how CLSR, specifically, may have contributed to them, there have been improvements since it began working with DPS, both in teacher practice – what's happening in classrooms and schools – and in student outcomes.

- **Practice.** Principals report that many teachers seem to be developing a new vision of teaching, one that is dynamic and collaborative and relies on their own continuous learning so that they can create student work that is stimulating and challenging. As their vision of teaching has evolved, their practice has also evolved. Principals speak of teachers making far less use of passive strategies such as lecturing, memorization, and "busy work" and relying instead on learning activities that encourages students to undertake research, critical analysis, writing, and experimentation. Central office and building personnel also speak of WOW providing them with a common language, which has cultivated their understanding of a shared goal and facilitated the work – much of it collaborative – to reach this goal.

  DPS central office staff report that many principals have also embraced a new leadership role that focuses on instructional support embedded in ongoing reflection and learning. On their own, DPS principals have created cadres – groups of five or six principals that meet regularly to share information, support one another, and receive assistance in responding to challenges. In addition to meeting regularly, the cadres have instituted "walk-throughs." Once a month, each cadre spends a day visiting one member's school. During the walk-through, the principals function as critical friends – learning from one another, identifying problems, and collaboratively creating solutions.

  Central office staff readily admit that, in the absence of the superintendent and the work of key staff to maintain the focus on WOW and improving student work, these changes would probably not be sustained across the system. There remain many teachers and even a few principals who do not fully understand WOW or who believe it to be the "reform flavor of the day" and so have not accepted it. Central office staff believe, however, that the changes they have witnessed reflect a strong foundation for sustainable reform.

- **Student outcomes.** Some indicators of student outcomes are beginning to improve. The drop-out rate for seventh through twelfth grades has fallen by almost 40 percent. Student test scores also rose in many areas. Since 1997, students in grades 3 through 8 have shown consistent improvement on North Carolina's end-of-grade exams in reading and mathematics. There continues to be a sizable achievement gap between majority and

minority students but it appears to be gradually diminishing.

It was unlikely that all of these changes can be traced solely to CLSR and the implementation of the WOW framework. DPS has utilized other resources such as a $3.2-million grant from the National Science Foundation to improve mathematics instruction across the district as well as a $2.6-million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to support after-school, weekend, and summer academic programs at selected schools. These additional and critical resources have been aligned with WOW. The engagement with CLSR has lent coherence to DPS's overall approach to reform.

First Things First: Kansas City, Kansas, and the Institute for Research and Reform in Education

The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) is a nonprofit organization that provides assistance to districts and schools in the implementation of a research-based approach to systemic reform. IRRE's approach emphasizes creating the conditions and supports necessary and sufficient for the entire reform framework to be implemented and sustained. It incorporates ongoing reflection and assessment into every phase of its work.

RSO Approach

IRRE holds that successful schools ensure that there are strong relationships between students and adults, effective instructional practices in every classroom every day, and policies and resources aligned to make the first two conditions possible.

To assist schools in developing these attributes, IRRE constructed a framework for change – First Things First (FTF) – that has seven critical features:

- low student-adult ratios and additional instructional time in literacy and mathematics;
- small learning communities (SLCs) that keep students and teachers together not only during the day but also across multiple school years;
- high, clear, and fair standards for what students should know and be able to do academically and behaviorally;
- enriched and diverse learning opportunities for students;
- meaningful learning experiences and clear expectations around effective instructional practices for all teachers;
- flexible resources for SLCs and schools so they can respond quickly to emerging needs;
- collective responsibility for student performance within SLCs, schools, and systems, through collective incentives and consequences.

These critical features are part of IRRE's theory of change. The theory of change is both a road map for schools and districts to improved teaching and learning and a means to assess their progress in achieving it.

District/RSO Partnership

IRRE's partnership with Kansas City Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS) began in 1996. In the mid-1990s, KCKPS was struggling. Many of its students and schools were persistently low-performing and seemingly resistant to attempts for improvement. The district was also frayed by racial tension. District leaders had developed a vision of and a plan for reform but the district did not have the capacity to implement it.

The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, which serves primarily the metropolitan areas of Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri, was a close observer of this and sought to assist it. The Foundation was familiar with the work of IRRE's founder, James Connell, and saw in its research-based theory of change the potential for thoughtful dialogue and action that could lead to real improvement in

KCKPS. District leadership concurred with the Foundation's assessment; Kauffman awarded KCKPS a grant to support a year of planning reform with IRRE.

- **Structure.** KCKPS created a district planning team, led by Bonnie Lesley, then associate superintendent and a "champion" of FTF. Lesley was an enthusiastic supporter of the reform, and she assumed day-to-day responsibility for planning and implementing it. The planning team spent the first grant year, 1996, working with IRRE staff to facilitate a series of roundtables for stakeholders within the district and the larger community. The roundtables were a mechanism to describe the need for reform and define the urgency to do so – in part through data – and to introduce First Things First (FTF) as the means for reform, to gather feedback on it, and to generate consensus for it.

  Drawing on the roundtables, the district planning team aligned FTF with the district's existing reform plan and created a strategy for implementing FTF. KCKPS was the first school district with which IRRE worked. Although IRRE had a carefully constructed theory of change to govern its work, it did not have a well-developed implementation plan. In part because of this, IRRE did not initially have a prescriptive approach to implementing FTF.[19] The planning team decided to phase in FTF over several years in school clusters that centered around a high school and included the middle and elementary schools that fed into it.

  Planning at the school level began during the 1997–1998 school year with one school cluster; the focus was on its high school – Wyandotte High School. Wyandotte's principal established a school stakeholders' team to spearhead the planning process. The emphasis of their work was on creating small learning communities (SLCs). IRRE staff met monthly with the school team and used their outside perspective to ask the team difficult questions and push their vision of teaching and learning. The team was also assisted by a School Improvement Facilitator (SIF). FTF requires that every school have a facilitator. The facilitator is usually a member of the central office staff whose position is allocated to this school-based function. SIFs assist school teams in developing their plans, ensure that the schools' plan aligns with the district's commitment to implement the critical features of FTF, and identify changes the central office needs to make to better support schools.

  The work of IRRE staff has shifted as the needs of the school clusters and of the central office have evolved. Initially IRRE's focus was on helping the central office create structures – such as the School Improvement Facilitator – that would support the work school teams were doing. As more school clusters began planning and implementing FTF, IRRE devoted more of its time to school teams, helping them work out the "nuts and bolts" of reform on the ground.

  Reform work is now underway in each of the school clusters, albeit at different stages and with varying levels of commitment. Focus is directed to strengthening the SLCs and getting them to concentrate on high-quality teaching and learning. This work is gradually beginning to create the conditions or structural requirements needed for successful reform. With these structures in place, IRRE staff and KCKPS faculty are now dedicating their attention to linking these structures

[19] IRRE would become more prescriptive about implementation as its work evolved in Kansas City and as it applied what it learned there to its approach in other sites.

to what they were intended to support – high-quality teaching. Creating district-level expectations and supports for structural change will not, however, by itself lead to significant improvements in teacher knowledge and skills; that will come with effective learning opportunities for teachers. IRRE staff members do not themselves have the expertise to provide meaningful guidance and support on teaching to teachers, principals, and other instructional leaders. As a result, IRRE has established a partnership with Kagan Cooperative Learning, a research-based professional development provider, which offers training to KCKPS faculty and staff.

IRRE is also devoting much of its time to supporting the district's implementation of a Family Advocate System (FAS), a mechanism to link students' school lives with their family and home lives. Through FAS, school staff are paired with students; the staff members meet at least twice a year with students' families and contact them monthly to keep them informed of students' progress and challenges. This component – connecting schools to families – was not originally part of FTF but grew out of the continuous reflection on and assessment of both IRRE and KCKPS staff on their work.

While its direct work in the school clusters may be somewhat less regular now, IRRE continues to fill a critical role in them. IRRE staff pose difficult questions to school teams and to their facilitators, not allowing them to become complacent but rather pushing them to think more strategically about driving reform deeper. IRRE continues to fill the role of an outside organization that supports and pressures the district to maintain its commitment to systemwide change.

The partnership between IRRE and KCKPS has been shaped by its funder, the Kauffman Foundation. The Foundation's involvement has extended beyond introducing KCKPS leadership to IRRE and funding their work; Kauffman has been an active participant in the work. Foundation representatives have regularly attended meetings with IRRE and KCKPS staff and faculty and shared their own research on and experiences with education reform to help inform the work in KCKPS. District faculty and IRRE staff readily acknowledge that Kauffman's contributions extend beyond its financial support.

- **Funding.** The Kauffman Foundation has provided the majority of funding for IRRE's work with KCKPS. From its first grant to KCKPS in 1996 through 2000, Kauffman provided support to the district first on a year-to-year basis and then with a three-year grant. Its continued funding was dependent on the district's progress in implementing FTF. The Foundation's investment in FTF during this period totaled approximately $4.5 million. In 2001, based on the interim results of the effort, Kauffman altered this practice and awarded KCKPS a five-year grant of $9.6 million, the second-largest grant in the Foundation's history. However, refunding during each of the phases of the new grant is contingent upon meeting performance standards established at the commencement of each phase. In October 1999, IRRE and its research partner MDRC were awarded an $11.1-million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to implement FTF in four districts: Houston; Shaw, Mississippi; Riverview Gardens, Missouri; and Greenville, Mississippi.
- **Duration.** The Kauffman Foundation has committed to funding the partnership through 2006, at which point the partnership will have lasted ten years. It is not yet clear what will happen at the end of the grant period.

The duration of the partnership may be affected by a second factor – student achieve-

ment scores. Community stakeholders, particularly the school board, have been consistent supporters of FTF; initial indicators of progress have validated their support. In most areas, however, student test scores have not yet changed much and, in an era of high-stakes testing, there is increasing pressure to begin showing improvement in test scores.

Partnership Results

In its theory of change, IRRE developed multiple indicators – both short- and long-term – of progress toward reaching the district's student outcome goals. The indicators are varied but have included, at various phases of the reform, change in teachers' awareness of the reform, changes in school structure, evidence of greater teacher involvement with their students and students' families, improved teaching practice, increased parental involvement, and improvements in student-achievement scores, graduation rates, drop-out rates, and disciplinary infractions, leading ultimately to higher achievement scores.

- **Practice.** Every school cluster has planned and begun implementation of FTF, which KCKPS views as a significant accomplishment. At Wyandotte High School, the center of the first cluster, teachers report having better relationships with their students and colleagues and have taken ownership of the school – it is "their" school, not the district's. Parental involvement has increased and some racial barriers among students have been broken down. One reason for this is that the composition of SLCs reflects student interests and goals rather than funneling of students into programs or tracks based on other factors, including past achievement levels, which, in some instances, has been seen to reflect race and ethnicity. KCKPS administrators readily acknowledge, however, that the depth of implementation of FTF is still uneven across the district. Some teachers in the last two clusters were particularly resistant to change. Over time, though, the administrators have seen more and more teachers fully embrace FTF – it is no longer a program or tool, but rather what they do.
- **Student outcomes.** As the core of the first cluster to implement FTF, Wyandotte High School shows the clearest signs of improvement in student outcomes. Its graduation rate has climbed from less than 50 percent to 70 percent and its freshman-to-sophomore persistence rate has increased from 65 to 90 percent. More students are taking the ACT and fewer of them are having disciplinary problems – suspensions have fallen by 25 percent. As FTF becomes embedded in the clusters that implemented FTF in subsequent years, educators anticipate similar results across the district. IRRE representatives point to improvements in high schools across the district in daily attendance, drop-out rates, and suspensions.

While these are promising signs of sustainable change, student test scores, while showing modest improvement districtwide, are well below the five-year post-implementation targets the district set as part of the reform effort; most schools are scheduled to meet these targets in the next two or three years. Improving instruction has proven to be the most difficult piece of reform, but IRRE and KCKPS expect that their more targeted and consistent focus on instruction will lead to better teaching and deeper learning that will be reflected in gradually increasing scores.

The district has won accolades for the improvements it has made thus far. Local media including business press have noted its accomplishments, as have national media outlets. In addition, *NEA Today*, the monthly magazine of the National Education Association, has highlighted the partnership, bringing recognition

to the union's contributions to the partnership. This recognition is more than congratulatory; it affirms the value of the reform work and helps sustain the will of stakeholders – both within the school system and outside of it – to "stay the course."

Creating Capacity: Flint, Michigan, and the Busara Group

The Busara Group is a fee-for-service consulting group that helps districts understand and address the management and financial exigencies of systemic reform.

RSO Approach

The Busara Group does not adhere to a specific approach or philosophy of education reform. Rather, it works with districts to help them develop and implement reform strategies best suited to each district's particular needs and characteristics. Busara's expertise is primarily in the administration and financial management of districts, including budget analysis, contract analysis, human resource analysis, strategic communications, strategic planning, survey compilation and analysis, and teacher compensation/evaluation. Busara also has experience in instructional areas such as standards development.

District/RSO Partnership

The Busara Group has worked with Flint Community Schools since 1999 when it was established as a consulting group by Learning Communities Network (LCN) to provide technical assistance to school districts. LCN was created by the Rockefeller Foundation to support the work of four school districts, including Flint Community Schools (FCS), which the Foundation was funding to design and implement systemic reform initiatives. FCS faculty and staff had worked closely with LCN staff, many of whom also worked for Busara after its founding, to design and begin implementing a systemic reform plan.

LCN and Busara are different organizations, with different structures. LCN works as a policy-focused organization, helping districts articulate their vision of reform and connecting them with others of similar interest. Busara concentrates on supporting the implementation of that vision. Yet, given its familiarity with and trust in LCN's staff, FCS quickly and easily established a relationship with Busara; for many in the district, LCN and Busara are indistinguishable.

- **Structure.** Busara assists FCS in implementing its reform plan, which calls for schools to be reconfigured into small learning communities so that students and teachers stay together for multiple years. Other hallmarks of the reform plan include reconstructing the FCS central office to be more responsive to teachers' and schools' needs and developing rigorous curriculum and performance standards.

  The nature of Busara's assistance to FCS has varied over time in response to the district's changing needs. Every year Busara staff and the FCS reform team meet to identify priorities and lay out an action plan for the year, which is encapsulated in a "scope of work." FCS staff describe the planning process as collaborative, with personnel from both organizations identifying needs and suggesting strategies for addressing them. The scope of work provides the foundation for Busara's annual contract with FCS; however, Busara's work frequently extends beyond the scope of work as Busara assists the district with unanticipated needs or crises.

  Busara provided assistance to FCS in developing its curriculum standards and extensive support for the district's strategic communications plan. Enhanced internal and external communication was an ongoing need of FCS, and Busara

had a lead role in helping FCS staff create an annual communications plan as well as developing communication materials.

In 2000 and again in 2002, FCS faced substantial budget shortfalls. In both instances, Busara provided extensive assistance in collecting and analyzing data on the district's budget, its staffing patterns, and its reform plan. Drawing on these, it created various models for strategies by which funds could be cut with as little disruption to the teaching staff as possible. In 2000, drawing on Busara's work, the district was able to avoid reducing its teaching force, as it originally had anticipated it would have to do. In 2002, however, the district had to cut 155 teaching positions and notified all central office personnel that they were being laid off, although some may be rehired following a district reorganization.

How Busara staff interact with FCS staff and faculty depends upon the specific task at hand. With some projects, Busara staff work together closely with FCS personnel and are often on-site, for instance when developing the communication plan and creating the curriculum standards. In other instances, Busara staff work more independently and off-site.

- **Funding.** FCS has participated in a systemic reform initiative funded by the Rockefeller Foundation since 1995. Busara's work is supported by the district's grant from the Foundation.
- **Duration.** The Busara Group was founded in 1999 by the Learning Communities Network (LCN), which was established by the Rockefeller Foundation as part of its district reform initiative to assist participating districts. The formal relationship between Busara and FCS was initiated in 1999 but grew out of the district's relationship with LCN, which began in 1995 at LCN's founding.

Rockefeller funding ended in December 2002. It is unlikely that the relationship will continue after this time. The superintendent who designed and began implementation of the reform Rockefeller was supporting resigned in late 2000. His resignation was largely the result of considerable disagreement with the school board over reform as well as resistance within the district to it. His successor, hired in January 2002, has not embraced the reform plan and has not sought outside funds to continue implementing it or to continue the work with Busara. Nor does the district have internal funding to support Busara. FCS, facing a significant financial shortfall, had to cut $24 million from its budget, which resulted in faculty and administrative layoffs and the possibility of school closings.

Partnership Results

The results of Busara's work in Flint are not easily gauged. Busara uses the scope of work to assess its work – did it produce the deliverables laid out in the scope of work? In assessing its efforts at technical assistance, Busara believes that the appropriate measure of performance is an understanding of how well the operational objectives, as defined by the client (the school district), were implemented and to what extent the immediate goals of the engagement were achieved. Neither FCS nor Busara have evaluated Busara's efforts in the context of the district's reform plan.

FCS, however, has made progress in implementing its reform plan. Rigorous curriculum standards, which passed review by state and national boards, were established. Most of the district's schools have been reconfigured as small learning communities and, although their implementation has been uneven in depth, many teachers have embraced the change. They are working collaboratively with their colleagues and have built strong relationships with their students.

It is unclear, however, whether these changes will be sustained. There have been several leadership changes in FCS and the most recently appointed superintendent, while not dismantling the reform components already in place, has made many of them, including reconfiguring schools as small learning communities, optional. For Busara, this different vision of where the district is heading renders questions about the sustainability of its past technical assistance irrelevant to an assessment of the success of the technical assistance in meeting the goals and operational objectives that were agreed on with the previous administration.

Stoking the Engine: Hamilton County, Tennessee, and the Public Education Foundation

The Public Education Foundation is a nonprofit organization based in and founded by Hamilton County community members to help Hamilton County Public Schools meet the needs of all students.

RSO Approach

The Public Education Foundation (PEF) believes that the key ingredients of strong schools and high achievement among all students are strong leaders, empowered and knowledgeable teachers, and engaged families. It has been collaborating with Hamilton County Public Schools (HCPS) to develop these attributes and improve student outcomes through several programmatic initiatives and comprehensive reform efforts.

District/RSO Partnership

PEF is a local education fund; it was founded in 1988 to support HCPS. While it strives to embed its work in research-based best educational practices, it does not adhere to a specific reform strategy. Many of its current initiatives have grown out of the district's emerging needs and goals – as assessed by PEF as well as by HCPS – and philanthropic opportunities to support change.

- **Structure.** PEF currently operates seven initiatives in HCPS. In some of them, PEF is a close collaborator with the district, supporting its reform efforts. In other initiatives, PEF works much more independently of HCPS, seeking to encourage the district to address issues the Foundation has identified as critical. PEF's seven initiatives are listed below.
  - *Standards Support.* PEF led a community-based group, which included district personnel and teachers, in a collaborative, multiyear process to develop rigorous curriculum standards. Having completed standards development, the Foundation is now facilitating their implementation by funding and providing training for two Standards-Support Teachers (SSTs) for every school. The SSTs provide on-site assistance to their colleagues in implementing the standards.
  - *Leadership Initiative.* At the district's request, PEF created the Leadership Initiative, which is housed at the Foundation. Initiative components include a two-year fellows program for emerging leaders, an annual winter retreat for all principals and key central office staff, and a summer institute on reform for principals, assistant principals, leadership fellows, and central office staff.
  - *Community Campaign for Student Success (CCSS).* PEF works with eight schools to develop effective strategies for increasing parental and community involvement. Through CCSS, the Foundation has offered faculty workshops, facilitated family nights at schools, gathered and analyzed data from parents, and supported communication materials such as newsletters.
  - *Critical Friends Group (CFGs).* PEF facilitates and supports CFGs – monthly meetings at which teachers review student work and share

ideas about improving their practice. PEF trains CFG coaches who lead the groups at their schools and works with school leaders to ensure that the structures needed for the CFGs' success are in place.

- *Schools for a New Society.* Through Schools for a New Society, PEF and HCPS collaborate closely to reform all of the district's high schools. Staff from both HCPS and PEF assisted each high school, during a year-long planning process, in developing school-specific reform strategies. The core component of each school's plan is the creation of small learning communities. PEF facilitates the implementation of the learning communities, with ongoing and substantial input from the district.
- *Benwood Initiative.* PEF and HCPS are also working together closely to transform the district's nine lowest-performing elementary schools, all of which are high-poverty, high-minority, inner-city schools. The Foundation and district developed a five-year plan that focuses on five areas: student achievement, quality and stability of teachers, effective leadership, family involvement, and facilities and supplies.
- *Teacher Quality Initiative (TQI).* The TQI is a research-driven initiative to enhance knowledge about and improve teacher excellence in HCPS. In its first phase, PEF worked with community members to identify the characteristics of excellent teachers and helped the district create a database for teacher records. Using the database, PEF then identified issues that affected teacher quality. In the current phase of work, the Foundation is focusing on teacher effectiveness. Through observation and interviews, PEF is working to identify the characteristics of high-performing teachers in HCPS, which will be the basis for guidelines on and models for quality teaching.

- **Funding.** PEF's annual budget is currently $7 million. PEF has received generous funding from the Annenberg and Benwood foundations and the Carnegie Corporation and has also received support from the U.S. Department of Education and other public and private sources. The Foundation also has an $8-million endowment, much of which it has dedicated to several initiatives ($6 million for Schools for a New Society and $2.5 million for the Benwood Initiative).
- **Duration.** PEF has worked with and for schools in the HCPS since its founding in 1988. While PEF's leadership acknowledges that the nature of its work may change in the future, it does not anticipate ending its work as long as there are children in Hamilton County who have diminished opportunities to reach their potential and who are at risk for poor educational outcomes.

Partnership Results

There have been changes in the district and in schools as a result of PEF's work with HCPS, some of which are readily calculable and some of which are not. Outcomes include the following:

- Curriculum standards have been developed and implemented.
- Eighty-five percent of educators support PEF's efforts to implement academic standards in the schools and 68 percent found PEF-trained Standards-Support Teachers helpful in implementing the standards.
- Twenty-six of PEF's Leadership Fellows have assumed leadership positions in the district.
- Attendance at parent-teacher conferences has increased dramatically in many schools.
- Ninety-three percent of teachers who participate in the CFGs indicate that the groups helped them improve their teaching methods.
- Ninety percent of parents who attended PEF's "Family Fun Literacy Night" found that they

learned something about reading with their children and 95 percent of them were inspired to read with their children more often.

Another significant result of the partnership between PEF and HCPS is the high level of philanthropic funding for reform that has come to the district. Large philanthropic commitments were made by the Annenberg Foundation ($4 million to support reform work including standards development and the Leadership Initiative), the Carnegie Corporation ($8.25 million for the Schools for a New Society Initiative), and the Benwood Foundation ($5 million for the Benwood Initiative). Jesse Register, HCPS superintendent, believes that the district, on its own, would not have won funding from either Carnegie or Benwood without its strong partnership with PEF.

PEF routinely administers surveys and solicits feedback from participants in its programs and also administers districtwide surveys to gauge its broader effect. These more qualitative indicators of impact are critically important, since they inform process and practice decisions within PEF's programs as well as within the district. Feedback from educators on the Standards-Support Teachers (SSTs), for example, was so positive that Register decided to reorganize the district's Division of Curriculum and Instruction, moving these personnel out of the central office and into the schools, where they serve as Consulting Teachers (CTs). The CTs are assigned to schools and, like the SSTs, assist teachers in implementing the standards. PEF provides assistance to and supports professional development for the SSTs and CTs.

At the same time, PEF's use of quantitative assessments has grown. Because it believes that it must be transparent to maintain its integrity and independence and because it also believes it should be held to the same standard of accountability as the district, PEF increasingly uses quantitative data to gauge the interim and long-term outcomes of its work with HCPS. Recently implemented initiatives have specific goals. Among the goals of the Benwood Initiative, for example, are that

- one hundred percent of all students who began the program in preschool or kindergarten read at grade level by the end of third grade;
- the assessments of the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) show more than 100 percent gain in reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies;
- more than 75 percent of the children meet or exceed the district's benchmark tasks for fourth-grade reading and mathematics;
- survey data show that more than 90 percent of all parents and all teachers are satisfied with their school and believe it supports their students and their teachers;
- the profile of the teaching staff mirror the district average in the number of new teachers, range of teaching experience, and credentials of teachers;
- attendance for both teachers and students average at or above 95 percent.

Progress toward meeting these goals will be evaluated through different tools including standardized exams, student and teacher data, and surveys.

Changing Partners: Cleveland, Ohio, and Its Local Partners

RSO Approach

Until recently, the Cleveland Municipal School District (CMSD) had multiple local reform support organizations dedicated to improving education and supporting the struggling district. Each RSO had

specific areas of expertise and provided differing types of support to the district. Although at times they worked together, the RSOs typically worked independently of one another and directly with the school district or in schools.

In this environment, the district was able to restructure, regain some of its capacity, and reestablish its leadership, including the hiring of district CEO (superintendent) Barbara Byrd-Bennett. Byrd-Bennett proceeded to build a vision of comprehensive reform for the district and a plan for realizing it that led to significant changes in relationships between the district and the RSOs, as well as among the RSOs themselves. She requested that the RSOs align their activities with her plan and support the district in developing the capacity to take back some of its traditional functions. Byrd-Bennett's proposal included consolidating the different nonprofit groups working with the district into one RSO. The RSOs' responses varied. Several of them merged around the new comprehensive agenda; one chose not to join the merger but supports the CEO's vision and helps implement it; another ceased activities in Cleveland.[10]

The RSOs that have worked toward systemic reform in Cleveland include:

- **Cleveland Initiative for Education.** Established initially by funders and business leaders in 1990 as an umbrella organization to coordinate and support the already-existing RSOs in Cleveland, CIE's work has evolved considerably since the mid-1990s. Current key CIE initiatives focus on professional development for teachers, leadership development for current and prospective principals, and school/business partnerships. Most CIE programs are systemwide and CIE staff work closely with CMSD central office personnel. A highlight of CIE's current work is the Cleveland Teachers Academy (CTA), a collaboration of the district, the teachers' union, several local universities, and CIE, which provides ongoing learning opportunities, emphasizing literacy, for Cleveland's teachers. CTA has been recognized as a model for how school districts and unions can work together productively to strengthen teaching. CIE also operates an institute for principals, an additional program for principals offered in collaboration with the district, and has assisted the district in the development and implementation of academic standards.

  CIE has emerged as the primary RSO and the locus of school reform in Cleveland and is now planning, with CMSD, the details of its work.

- **Cleveland Education Fund.** CEF was established in 1984 in the wake of *A Nation at Risk*. Its work was premised on the belief that "improving the professional knowledge and practice of teachers is the most effective and efficient way to impact student achievement." Until recently, it operated twenty programs; its key initiatives focused on curriculum and professional development in math and science. Many of CEF's initiatives focused on individual teachers, but it also offered systemwide programs.

  Its traditional focus was on CMSD; CEF later expanded its geographic area to include "first-ring" suburban districts, the school districts immediately surrounding CMSD, as these districts began to struggle with the same issues of low student achievement and poverty that characterized urban districts.

  CEF has now ceased its operations in Cleveland.

[10] For a full update on the more recent changes in Cleveland, see Kronley & Handley 2003.

- **Institute for Educational Renewal.** Initially IER sought to improve student outcomes by helping individual teachers develop their knowledge and skills. Its focus has since expanded to whole-school change. It works with schools to help them become child-centered, offering a rich and interactive curriculum that responds to the needs of all students. IER uses a balanced literacy framework to guide its work. IER is currently, by contract with the district, working in ten elementary and middle schools to implement whole-school change; it also works with two schools whose relationship with IER predates the contract with CMSD. The district CEO also requested that IER assist in the development and implementation of curriculum standards.

  IER chose not to participate in the RSO consolidation and works independently, concentrating primarily on school-based work.

- **Cleveland Summit.** The Summit, closely connected to business and civic leadership, has provided ongoing support to the district by establishing links between the school district and the greater Cleveland community. It has served as a convener and facilitator of discussions and focus groups for community members – initially, around issues of school governance and, in recent years, on school safety and climate. It also joined with CIE to help the district recruit and develop prospective principals, provide mentoring for first-year principals, and provide ongoing training for experienced principals.

  The Summit has now merged with CIE.

Although they are not formally RSOs, local foundations (the Gund and Cleveland foundations) and business organizations (Cleveland Tomorrow) have often assumed some functions of an RSO in Cleveland. They established CIE and have been a stable funding source to it and the other RSOs, but their participation also extended far beyond funding. Often joined by the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, they persisted in identifying ineffective or suspect district practices, worked to sustain the community's support for and commitment to the district despite its dysfunction, and served as a source for or provided access to district and school staff on effective reform strategies. In addition, each of these organizations provided stable leadership throughout the district's extended period of revolving leaders, helping to craft a plan to rebuild the district. The Jennings Foundation also supported both the district and various external organizations.

Other organizations in Cleveland have also worked to improve outcome for students. Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) designs and implements workforce preparation programs for teenagers and young adults in Cleveland, East Cleveland, and several other low-income communities in the greater metropolitan Cleveland area. YOU and others, such as the Cleveland Scholarship Program, provide valuable services to the students of CMSD but do not typically engage the district in initiatives geared toward promoting systemic change. The Federation for Community Planning applies research to work on critical issues facing the community and, while its focus is not on education, has helped the district by connecting education to health and human service issues. *Catalyst* is an independent periodical that reports on education issues and comments on what it sees as unresolved issues, successes, and faults in the system.

District/RSO Partnership

The relationships between CMSD and its local RSOs have undergone significant changes. Prior to the arrival of the current district CEO, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, in 1998, CMSD had been in disarray for much of the preceding three decades. During this time, the RSOs invested time, money, expertise,

and civic commitment to ameliorate the various crises – in finances, in leadership, and in overall performance – that confronted the district. Between 1984 and 2000, the district had ten CEOs, and so great was its fiscal mismanagement that the district, by federal court order, was taken over by the state. At the same time, outcomes for students were increasingly bleak. Student test scores were persistently low and far too few students had successful academic careers; high school graduation rates were dismal.

The local RSOs stepped into the void and assumed significant responsibility for infusing capacity in a school system that sorely lacked it. Each developed expertise in specific areas and played different roles in the system.

Since her arrival, Byrd-Bennett has focused on recreating the district. To that end, she developed a comprehensive reform plan that has driven the work of the district since 1999. Although she recognized the RSOs' contributions, she had difficulty – given their number and the broad array of activities they were engaged in – monitoring their work and ensuring that it supported the reform plan.

Byrd-Bennett requested that each RSO align its work with the plan, which they sought to do. This did not alleviate all of her concerns, however. The continued independence of the RSOs from one another often led to, in Byrd-Bennett's view, "ineffectiveness, poor communication, and duplication of work." She also saw that the internal capacity of the district had grown to the point that CMSD could assume responsibility for some of the functions the RSOs had undertaken. Finally, she questioned whether all of the RSOs had aligned their work with that of the district.

Byrd-Bennett concluded that the relationship between the district and the RSOs needed to change to support the district's reform efforts more effectively. As a result, she proposed a consolidation of the RSOs and created a plan to do so. Under Byrd-Bennett's plan, the new RSO would work in four primary areas:

- supporting standards development and implementation;
- creating leadership capacity within the district to address instructional and administrative goals;
- promoting meaningful public engagement to support the district and reform;
- promoting investment in and recognition of CMSD's direction and governance.

The RSOs responded in different ways to this proposal. CIE and the Summit have now merged and have dedicated their work toward a comprehensive agenda of strategic, human, and civic capacity building. The surviving organization, now called CIE, has received funding from both the Gund and Cleveland foundations. Another RSO, CEF, chose to end its work in the district; it has essentially ceased its traditional operations in Cleveland, merging with the Center for Educational Leadership in nearby Loraine County. This new group intends to function as a regional RSO for northeastern Ohio. Yet another, IER, chose not to join the merger, but continues to support the CEO's vision and is working to help implement it. IER remains independent and is seeking to align some of its work with CIE; at this writing, the Cleveland Foundation was considering its request for support.

The merger has raised multiple issues for the RSOs and for the funders that support them; primary among them are concerns about role, expectations, citizen voice, race and diversity, independence, isolation, and sustainability. The role of RSOs, at least initially, is defined by their founders, who are typically community members. Yet in this instance it is the district that may be moving to do more than set

expectations for the RSO's role – it is prescribing a work plan and associated tasks.

The relationships between the district and the various RSOs are undergoing profound change that leads to many questions. How will the district and the RSO decide on strategies for fulfilling the evolving role of an RSO in Cleveland? Up to the time of the merger, different organizations among the array of RSOs in Cleveland had played different roles: pushing the district to reform by traditional support strategies, pulling the district toward reform by demanding change, or serving as a fund-raising arm for the district. In the surviving RSO, which of these roles will continue?

Local RSOs' connection to community members often extends beyond raising their awareness of districts' challenges. They often provide one of the few mechanisms community members have for participating in meaningful dialogues about solutions to those challenges. Will an RSO that is closely allied with a district, as may be the case with the proposed RSO, be able to provide that mechanism?

Embedded in the concerns around defining role and function and preserving a means for citizen participation is a concern about independence. Will the RSO be able to pursue issues and undertake activities that it believes respond to critical student needs? Some local RSOs are able to maintain their independence through possessing independent resources or substantial endowments, or by winning large grants from national foundations. Funds that are under their own control or provided by funders not connected to the district enable local RSOs to sometimes undertake activities that pull districts to change. Will the proposed RSO have the capacity to build an endowment or raise the funds to enable its independence?

District/RSO Partnerships: A Snapshot

The reform activities that the RSOs and the districts in this analysis engaged in were extensive and varied. The chart on pages 34–35 provides an overview of these activities and is intended to be a reference tool for reviewing the findings of our analysis. It is not a typology of the RSOs or of their individual approaches to and beliefs about reforming public education, but rather is an aid to the reader to distinguish between the RSOs in this analysis.

Findings

The findings that follow arise out of our investigations in five districts. These findings track a continuum that begins when a decision is made – internally or externally to the district – about the district's need to undertake systemic reform and about how the RSO can contribute to that process. These decisions consider, among other things, RSO beliefs and the actions that arise out of these beliefs; the central role of the district leader in defining, promoting, and continually shaping the initiative; the roles of other stakeholders, including the central role of funders; and the need for collaboration that transcends the formal interactions of the district and the RSO. These findings surface learnings about the relationship dynamic between partners in reform.

Context for Engagement

1. Reform support organizations are either local, with established roots in the district and a mission to serve it, or "imported" organizations, which function independently of a specific community; this distinction substantially shapes the relationship between an RSO and a district and directly influences many of the subsequent findings.

District		Durham Public Schools (DPS) North Carolina	Flint Community Schools (FCS) Michigan	Hamilton County Public Schools (HCPS), Tennessee
Number of Students		30,636	21,513	41,453
Student Ethnicity (Percent)	African American	56.1	75.6	32.5
	White	30.7	19.4	64.9
	Hispanic	7.8	2.5	1
	Asian	2.4	0.5	1.4
	Other	3	2.1	–
Reform Support Organization		Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR), Louisville, KY	The Busara Group, Inc. Cleveland, OH	Public Education Foundation (PEF) Chattanooga, TN
RSO Type		Imported	Imported	Local
Year RSO Begun		1988	1999	1988
Year Partnership Begun		1998	1999	1988
Primary Partnership Activities		CLSR developed a framework (Working on the Work) for re-creating teaching and learning based on the belief that the work – the learning opportunities and activities provided to students – is the core business of teachers and administrators. DPS chose to implement CLSR's framework in groups of schools over a three-year period. CLSR provided regular, on-site assistance to leadership teams from each school, who were responsible for helping their colleagues master the framework. CLSR also provided on-site training to district leadership and follow-up support through phone and electronic communication. All DPS principals participated in CLSR's Principals Academy.	The Busara Group provided extensive technical assistance to FCS in a variety of areas, primarily around the district's management and financial systems and its communications strategies, but also, as needed, on matters of instruction such as the creation of curriculum standards. Busara staff worked primarily with central office personnel and were frequently on-site.	PEF operates seven programs, some in close cooperation with the HCPS and others more independently, that collectively support the district's systemic reform effort. Key programs include Standards Support, in which PEF staff facilitated the development of district standards and now support their implementation; the Benwood Initiative, an effort to transform the district's nine lowest-performing elementary schools; Schools for a New Society, a comprehensive initiative to re-create all of the district's high schools as small learning communities; and the Leadership Initiative, a broad effort to build the knowledge and skills of current and future district leaders.
Funders		Glaxo Wellcome Foundation	Rockefeller Foundation	Annenberg Foundation, Benwood Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, U.S. Department of Education

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District		Kansan City Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS) Kansas	Cleveland Municipal School District (CMSD) Ohio
Number of Students		21,215	73,001
Student Ethnicity (Percent)	African American	50.2	70.8
	White	23.1	18.5
	Hispanic	22.7	8.8
	Asian	3.5	0.7
	Other	0.4	1.2
Reform Support Organization		Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), Toms River, NJ	Cleveland Initiative for Education (CIE) Cleveland Education Fund (CEF) Institute for Educational Renewal (IER) Cleveland Summit
RSO Type		Imported	Local
Year RSO Begun		1989	Cleveland Initiative for Education (CIE): 1990 Cleveland Education Fund (CEF): 1984 Institute for Educational Renewal (IER): 1992 Cleveland Summit: 1990
Year Partnership Begun		1996	Cleveland Initiative for Education (CIE): 1990 Cleveland Education Fund (CEF): 1984 Institute for Educational Renewal (IER): 1992 Cleveland Summit: 1990
Primary Partnership Activities		Based on extensive research, IRRE staff created a framework, First Things First, to transform schools. The framework has seven components, including the creation of small learning communities within schools which keeps teachers and students together over multiple years; high standards; active student engagement in learning; and greater autonomy and responsibility in decision making and resource use for schools. FTF has been implemented in clusters of schools across the district over a 3-year period. IRRE staff have worked closely with leadership teams from each school, which are responsible for designing and implementing the learning communities, and with central office personnel to develop the supports schools need. Independent evaluation teams are assessing partnership outcomes.	The Summit has merged with CIE; the consolidated organization continues to be called the Cleveland Initiative for Education. Its activities fall into three categories: building strategic capacity, building human capacity, and building civic capacity. Activities undertaken include supporting standards implementation, including aligning Cleveland Teachers Academy courses with the standards; fund-raising; providing leadership development; engaging parents around the district's reform plan; and enhancing the business/school partnership program. CEF, which had focused on providing professional development in math and science, is no longer working with CMSD. IER has continued to operate independently of the other RSOs but is supporting, at the district's request, whole-school reform efforts in selected schools and providing assistance with standards implementation.
Funders		Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation	George Gund Foundation, Cleveland Foundation, Cleveland Tomorrow, Joyce Foundation

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Reform support organizations vary significantly. Meaningful differences among them include origin, beliefs, approaches to reform, areas of expertise, structure, and funding. These features, in the aggregate, shape what they do, how they do it, and with whom they do it. Given the breadth of these variations, it is difficult to assign RSOs to specific categories. There is one distinction, however, that stretches beyond those named above -- whether an RSO is local or imported.

The reform support organizations that have partnered with the Hamilton County (Tennessee) Public Schools and the Cleveland Municipal School District are local organizations. Each was founded by community groups or individuals to serve the community by assisting its school district; the way they do so varies, as do their roles in the districts and in their communities.

Local RSOs are focused, in most cases exclusively, on the districts in which they are based. Often, and for many reasons, not least of which is influential boards, they are significant and respected organizations in their communities. Local RSOs live with their partner districts and the districts live with them. For the local RSO, the relationship with the district is its major and sometimes only reason for existence. It cannot walk away from its partner district unless it is willing to risk, if not instigate, its own demise.

While school districts may face less dire consequences should they choose to distance themselves from the RSOs, there may also be consequences for them if they do so. They may forgo resources, both financial in the form of grants that the RSOs' efforts attract, and human, in the energy provided by committed and enthusiastic volunteers.

Equally important, they may lose powerful community support. The RSO may be distinguished by a web of connections with business leaders, foundation executives, or public officials whose goodwill may be valued by the district leadership. Breaking the relationship with the RSO may mean the loss of this goodwill. One of the issues confronting Cleveland's CEO today in her effort to establish one RSO to replace the many that have engaged the district in different ways is the effect of this action on community leaders. The CEO consequently has moved to this strategy slowly, taking care to consult with the affected organizations and with a variety of community leaders. In other districts, lack of support from the community might be transformed into an adversarial relationship in which a spurned RSO, utilizing the media and conducting public engagement campaigns, will focus on the district's challenges without acknowledging its successes, souring public opinion of the district and its leaders.

This context often shapes both the relationships and the work of local RSOs and their partner districts. Many district/local-RSO partnerships center on programs and, in most instances, work develops organically and opportunistically. Short-term program decisions are made in the context of building and maintaining long-term relationships. For the most part, local RSOs are not prescriptive; they do not offer a defined framework of behavior or structures. Rather, they are diagnostic. They identify problems, analyze their causes, and, almost always, in cooperation with the district or schools and enabled by their intimate knowledge of the community, develop solutions that reflect the specific needs of the district or schools.

Local RSOs also typically assume responsibility for procuring funding to support their work with districts. This does not mean that districts will not incur costs related to the work that RSOs do, but that they are often less explicit (in-kind costs) or they are not fully calculated at the program's initiation.

The RSOs that have partnered with Durham Public Schools, Flint Community Schools, and Kansas City Kansas Public Schools are all "imported" organizations that work in numerous districts and often approach systemic reform through a specific and highly individualized framework that includes beliefs, structures, and actions. Imported RSOs are often identified by these frameworks and the approaches that have evolved out of them.

In Durham, Flint, and Kansas City, each district recognized its own lack of capacity to undertake systemic reform and sought assistance from an outside organization as a means to improve student outcomes. Although the district/RSO partnerships in Flint and Kansas City were the result of direct intervention by foundations, in each instance the districts had the option of looking to other RSOs for support or of deciding not to partner at all. In any of the three partnerships, the district could have ended the relationship at any point had it determined that the relationships were no longer adding value to the district's reform work. The consequences for doing so in their communities would have been decidedly less significant than they would have been had the RSOs been local – perhaps not even widely noticed.

Engaging imported organizations usually means that a financial cost is incurred. As we discuss below, that cost is the responsibility of the district but it is often assumed by foundations or other third-party funders. Regardless of who pays the RSO, the realization that there is often a substantial financial cost can cause district leadership to devote more sustained attention to the reform. The investment in the imported RSO is balanced against what the same dollars might buy elsewhere. The RSO needs to continually convince the district that its work is adding value. Both the RSO and the district may be allied in convincing a third-party funder that its investment is worthwhile.

One of the cost elements in a district/RSO relationship is the imported RSO's expertise. Expertise, along with the credibility and reputation that come with it, afford the RSO a certain legitimacy as it begins its work in the district. Furthermore, the RSO's position as an outsider frees it, at least initially, from identification with different factions in the district, while at the same time making it more dependent on district leadership, notably the superintendent, for support in its endeavors. In some instances, its more limited presence in the district may help district faculty and staff to assume responsibility for the reform more quickly than they might have otherwise.

2. Almost all RSOs operate pursuant to stated beliefs, which lead to distinctive approaches to reform; imported organizations vary significantly in their willingness and capacity to expand their approaches to meet multiple or shifting district needs.

Ultimately each RSO – local or imported – seeks the same goal: improved capacity for adults that will lead to better outcomes for students in its partner districts. However, there is considerable variance in how the RSOs believe the goal and the attendant outcomes can best be attained.

Local RSOs, while identifying attributes that they believe are critical to meaningful reform, tend to be more flexible in how those attributes are cultivated and applied. A successful long-term relationship with their partner districts almost demands flexibility. Districts' needs change as the context in which they operate evolves and as they make progress in implementing reform – local RSOs must be able to adapt to these changes. In addition, local RSOs, which depend at least in part on the goodwill of the district, cannot risk losing that goodwill by

demanding that districts conform to a reform framework that they neither chose nor helped design.

The Public Education Foundation (PEF) believes that there are three essential ingredients for strong schools and high achievement among all students: strong leaders, empowered and knowledgeable teachers, and engaged families. Although it draws on research and field experience to inform its work, PEF does not advocate specific strategies for developing these ingredients. It develops or seeks out and offers programs to nurture each – including the Leadership Initiative to support current and future leaders; the Critical Friends Groups and Standards-Support Teachers to develop teachers' knowledge and skills; and the Community Campaign for Student Success to help schools connect to parents, particularly low-income parents – but each program was constructed in response to the particular characteristics of Hamilton County Public Schools. PEF has deliberately eschewed a rigid approach to its work, believing that too prescriptive a manner might ultimately limit its effectiveness.

Since its inception in 1984, the Cleveland Education Fund (CEF) has held that "improving the professional knowledge and practice of teachers is the most effective and efficient way to impact student achievement." Like PEF, CEF has relied on research and data to inform its work but it does not have a specific outline or framework that drives the structure of its various initiatives. While no longer working in Cleveland, CEF at one time operated over twenty programs designed to develop teachers' knowledge and skills through varying means. Project TEEM, for example, was an effort to improve math instruction among teachers in all of the district's eighty-one elementary schools, primarily through on-site professional development. CEF joined local universities to provide intensive training in leadership and math content to lead teachers from each school who, in turn, trained and provided assistance to their colleagues.

Project TEEM was a very different mechanism for building teacher knowledge and skill from those that CEF used when it was founded. At that time, CEF directed its resources to providing financial assistance via competitive grants to teachers to support innovative instructional strategies. This practice later continued, but evolved around new criteria and new outcome goals that emphasized building capacity and student achievement. These were different approaches to strengthening teaching that rose out of CEF's developing knowledge and the evolving needs of teachers, schools, and the district.

The flexibility in approach that these local RSOs have demonstrated, while essential to the relationship, does not indicate a willingness to support their partner districts blindly or to move away from their values and educational philosophies. Jesse Register, the superintendent of Hamilton County Public Schools, is an advocate of magnet schools; PEF is not. While it will not lobby against magnet schools, it has determined that it will not support their establishment in the county.

Imported RSOs vary greatly in how their approaches reflect a belief system about reform. Among these organizations, the Busara Group is distinguished by its pragmatism. While it adheres to a set of values that inform its work, it does not hold a specific philosophy about or approach to reform. Rather, it works with districts to help them implement the reform strategies best suited to the particular needs and characteristics of each district. In Flint, Busara provided extensive assistance on standards development, communications, and budget and human resource analysis. In other districts, it may provide help on very different matters such as special education, site-based management, or professional development.

While the Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR) has a specific framework – Working on the Work (WOW) – that rests on a series of beliefs about teaching and learning and guides all of its work, it is also flexible in the implementation of the WOW framework. Durham Public Schools' superintendent, Ann Denlinger, reacting to feedback from central office staff and principals, decided that WOW would be introduced into three groups of schools over a three-year period. CLSR configured its training program to conform to this. Similar flexibility informs CLSR's training sessions. DPS faculty report that CLSR staff consistently sought their feedback on the training experiences so that if one approach was not working, staff could make adjustments.

The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) also has a series of beliefs about effective teaching and meaningful learning that has given rise to a framework, First Things First (FTF). FTF, however, rests on specific conditions that not only shape the interaction between teachers and students, but also shape the structure of schools and central office. FTF also offers implementation strategies for getting these beliefs into practice throughout a system. A core implementation strategy of FTF is the creation of small learning communities in schools in which teachers and students not only remain together for extended periods during the day but stay together for several years. The Family Advocate System links teaching and other staff to small groups of students and their families. There are other specific features that schools and districts are required to implement, such as School Improvement Facilitators.

As the implementation strategies of FTF are defined, so are the processes to build awareness of these strategies and their intended outcomes. In the first phase of the relationship, for example, IRRE and partner districts facilitate a series of roundtables to explain the pressing need for reform and to introduce FTF as a means to address that need. Although tightly designed, FTF is not without flexibility. Each learning community has a specific focus area – science and technology, performing and fine arts, business, humanities, health careers, and more – and each school determines for itself what its small learning community will be, based on the needs and interests of its students, and what will make up its curriculum.

RSOs in this analysis displayed a willingness and ability to adapt their approaches to the specific context of the districts in which they were working without modifying their beliefs about how reform might best be promoted. This ability to adapt enhanced their relationships with their district partners and, in all likelihood, enabled them to continue and expand their efforts. How flexible an organization is within the confines of its mission may be a useful indicator of its capacity to engage in promoting systemic reform in the complex and protean environment that characterizes school systems.

3. District/RSO partnerships can energize educators, support and engage diverse talent and skills, and identify latent capacities in segments of school and district staff; this occurs regardless of the theory behind or content of any specific approach to reform.

Teachers, principals, and other educators have little patience with "the reform flavor of the day" – improvement plans, usually having a programmatic approach, that are often instituted annually, displacing the previous year's improvement program. These changes are abrupt and, partly as a result of this, the programs are frequently unfocused and disconnected from educators' most pressing challenges. Just as a teacher or principal becomes comfortable with one program, it is replaced with a new one

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that may have little in common in approach or philosophy with the first one. As a result, many educators often ignore new initiatives or become at best passive participants in their implementation, acquiescent but not enthusiastic.

In virtually every district, there was initially skepticism about the reform work proposed and undertaken by the district and RSO. Yet, when it became evident that the leaders in these districts were committed to reform over the long term and that, through the district/RSO partnership, teachers and administrators would have reliable guidance and support, many of them responded with enthusiasm and were eager to deepen their knowledge and skills so that they could better meet their students' needs.

This has been the experience of Durham Public Schools. While administrators at both the school and district levels in Durham are vocal advocates for CLSR and the WOW framework, they are clear that the superintendent's visible commitment to WOW over the long term and the ongoing and accessible support provided to principals and teachers in implementing WOW have been the foundation of its success. This is the key reason teachers, principals, and others embraced it. They believe that almost any reform strategy the superintendent chose and supported could have been implemented successfully if it had had the visible commitment of district leadership and had lasted long enough to become embedded in the district's work. They note, however, that the quality of reform strategies or doctrines varies considerably. They believe that few reform approaches could match WOW's development of teacher knowledge and skills and its impact on outcomes for students.

Kansas City's involvement with an imported RSO also released a significant amount of energy in the district. Early participants in the school clusters view the First Things First initiative as a means to focus their attention on the need to transform the district and provide a means to bring about change. These educators understand that the framework for reform, while meaningful and powerful in itself, was in some ways most valuable as a mechanism for sustained engagement. Connecting to the reform is a way of connecting to similarly minded colleagues, whose perceptions and commitment reinforce their own. The strong support of district leadership added to their enthusiasm for change and bolstered their resolve to move ahead. At the same time, the presence of an outside organization underscored the pioneering nature of their efforts, linked them to current research on effective practices, and anchored their experimentation while constantly urging them to test the waters.

4. Local and national foundations play an ongoing and critical role in establishing, defining, nurturing, and maintaining district/RSO partnerships and, in doing so, function as a type of reform support organization; without their commitment, many partnerships would founder.

Foundation support is critical to district/RSO partnerships. Without the action taken by local, regional, or national foundations, it is unlikely that that most of these partnerships would have been initiated and, in some instances, sustained.

The partnerships between Flint Community Schools and the Busara Group and between Kansas City Kansas Public Schools (KCKPS) and IRRE were established directly as a result of foundation intervention. Busara was launched by the Learning Communities Network (LCN), which was the creation of the Rockefeller Foundation and, within Flint, there was little distinction between the two organizations. In Flint, there was also a keen awareness of the close ties between LCN/Busara and Rockefeller. The Kauffman Foundation brought IRRE to the attention of Kansas City district leaders and assumed an active role in the reform work

IRRE and KCKPS undertook. Kauffman not only funded and monitored reform, but its staff assisted in developing it – participating in planning meetings and sharing their knowledge about and experience with sound educational policy and best practices. In each case the foundation also moved the work ahead by demanding more from the partners. Staff of each funder became thoroughly familiar with the theory behind the partnership and the partnership's activities and asked critical questions that tested the assumptions and charted the progress of the initiative.

In Durham, the philanthropic connection to the district/RSO relationship may appear less direct than in Flint and Kansas City but it is equally critical. Durham's superintendent, Ann Denlinger, was introduced to CLSR through her participation in the BellSouth Foundation's Superintendents' Network. Denlinger learned about CLSR, its approach, philosophy, and staff, through the Network, which was coordinated by CLSR, enabling her to feel confident that CLSR's educational philosophy aligned with hers and that the organization had the capacity to meet Durham's needs. In addition, CLSR's work in Durham has been supported by a grant from the Glaxo Wellcome Foundation. The engagement would not have happened without this support, since the district did not have funds available. In addition, Denlinger noted that she had greater flexibility with nonpublic than with public funds and could more easily use them to support reform-related activities.

Each of the three imported RSOs considered here is a fee-for-service organization. In each case the RSO work was supported by a foundation. In two instances the work was underwritten by nearby foundations and, in the remaining case, the funder provided support as part of a national program. An important question around the sustainability of reform efforts is what happens when, as it invariably does, foundation funds are no longer available. One test for the district's commitment to a reform is if it is willing to invest its own funds in sustaining it.[21]

The role of foundations in establishing and maintaining reform partnerships is also critical for local RSOs. The Annenberg Challenge grant that the Public Education Foundation received in 1994 pushed PEF to, as its president noted, "grow up." It was a large, highly visible, and prestigious grant and helped PEF move from more programmatic initiatives to efforts that were systemic in scope and outcomes. In part because of its accomplishments, supported by Annenberg funding, PEF came to the attention of other funders – both local (Benwood Foundation) and national (Carnegie Corporation) – which in turn provided additional significant grant opportunities. These new grants have been critical to the district's ongoing reform work and, according to HCPS superintendent Jesse Register, it is unlikely that the grants would have been awarded to the district alone.

In Cleveland, local foundations and business interests – the George Gund and Cleveland foundations and Cleveland Tomorrow – have been a major force. They established the Cleveland Initiative for Education, which has become the major RSO in

[21] This test, though, is also contextual. District/RSO time frames for reform may – and in many cases, should – differ from those of funders. Funding organizations may also want to continue supporting relationships for longer than initially contemplated if expectations align and interim outcomes are satisfactory. Context also affects the availability of funds. In the current environment of drastic state budget cuts and restricted resources for education, even districts that are eager to reorder their spending priorities may not have sufficient funds to devote to the work with RSOs. Some funders may require district financial investment as a condition of their support. This is true of the Ball Foundation, an operating foundation that functions as an RSO and works with multiple districts.

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the community. Funders have also provided ongoing support to other RSOs in the area.

Creating and sustaining the Cleveland RSOs was a tangible manifestation of philanthropic commitment to saving a system that was on the verge of extinction. Funders in the community, joined by the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, were instrumental in supporting district leadership through multiple crises, in helping the community cast a dubious eye on suspect practices, in connecting the district to innovative work taking place nationally, and in generating public will to stay the course until effective leadership could be found to begin to turn things around. Leaders and staff from these organizations convened or participated in most, if not all, of the significant meetings to help develop a plan to save the system. They were active in the plan's formulation and supported substantial elements of it. Major funders and business-related organizations in Cleveland essentially served as reform support organizations, interacting constantly with other RSOs that they had created and nurtured.

A significant outcome of the stability that funder/RSO collaboration in Cleveland helped bring to the district was the appointment of a new district CEO. Barbara Byrd-Bennett brought a new vision of public education to Cleveland and has made considerable progress in altering the negative perception many in the community had of the district. These developments have shifted the context in which the RSOs work. In the years prior to her arrival, these organizations provided needed capacity to the district, in some cases assuming functions that are traditionally vested in the central office and in schools. In doing so, they formed strong relationships with central office staff and building leaders. As a result, RSOs garnered substantial leeway in determining what programs were appropriate and a good deal of autonomy in implementing these programs. The CEO's strong leadership and more structured management style changed this. Byrd-Bennett developed a plan for realizing her vision of comprehensive reform and requested that the RSOs align their activities with her plan, which included consolidating the RSOs. As a result, one RSO ceased activities in Cleveland and several RSOs joined forces around a new comprehensive agenda focused on building strategic, human, and civic capacity.

5. Powerful remnants of racial discrimination significantly influence aspects of the educational issues that districts face but are often only indirectly addressed in the district/RSO relationships and the reform strategies that they embrace.

Race and the achievement gap that arises out of decades of unequal treatment affect the context of reform in each of these communities. Leaders in all of the districts spoke of the need for and their commitment to reducing the disparities between majority and minority students. Race, however, is rarely referred to explicitly in reform plans, nor are specific strategies to meet the needs of minority students usually incorporated into those plans. RSOs express concern about the persistent achievement gap, but few of them appear to push for the inclusion of programs or initiatives targeted to minority students, and race is not addressed directly by many of these groups.

The reluctance to recognize explicitly that minority students may face unique challenges that arise at least in part from the districts' past conduct and to incorporate strategies that address these challenges into reform work can be attributed to several factors that sometimes work together. For one thing, districts have embraced standards, and the premise and power of the standards movement is that every student – regardless of race or any other distinguishing characteristic – will achieve at a level defined by the standards. Standards may be regarded as "race-neutral," therefore making specific initiatives

for minority children unnecessary, or, perhaps, district leaders and other stakeholders may believe that any needs specific to minority students will be addressed through the effective implementation of the standards.

Secondly, race is a difficult, often contentious issue in most of these communities. Durham and Chattanooga both underwent mergers of predominantly white county school systems and predominantly African American city schools. Faculty and community members cited divisions around the mergers in both communities, and often within the systems, along racial lines – divisions that have at times been difficult to bridge. Both Kansas City and Cleveland were for many years under court orders to desegregate their systems. In each of these communities, the findings of ongoing discrimination in the educational systems that led to these court orders were viewed as divisive and as a factor in diminished community support for the schools. Given this, district leaders may be reluctant to raise the issue of race. They may have also been reluctant to undertake programs explicitly targeted to a specific ethnic group out of concern that doing so would give the appearance of "singling out" or favoring one group over another.

In part as a result of racial struggles centered on education, many districts now find themselves serving a student population that is overwhelmingly minority. In these school systems, district and RSO leaders may frame their collaborations around larger reforms, which, if successful, will reduce racial disparities in achievement. An underlying premise here is that for reform to work in these places it must sooner or later come to grips with race. For example, IRRE, which works with several districts where minority students are in the majority, seeks to embed issues of race and class in the fabric of its reform. It deals with race as a relational issue in its materials and through its community roundtables. The small learning communities that are the core of IRRE's reform approach and that have been implemented in Kansas City have offered safe places where race and class differences between students and their families and some of the teachers and administrators in the schools can be approached and addressed. District leaders, along with RSOs, may therefore seek to respond to the unique needs of minority children in ways less overtly defined by race.

The Benwood Initiative in Hamilton County targets the nine lowest-performing elementary schools in the district, eight of which are among the lowest-performing elementary schools in Tennessee. Their students are also overwhelmingly African American and more than 90 percent of them qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. To facilitate implementation of the initiative and in recognition that urban schools – in part because they typically serve minority students – are distinct from suburban and rural schools, Register created the position of assistant superintendent for urban education to deal with these and related issues.

Finally, the theories of change that influence some imported RSOs and the premises behind the programs that some local RSOs adopt might not, for the most part, deal explicitly with race. RSOs may choose to use other issues as a proxy for race. Primary among them is class, which is in itself a major issue in urban schools. Yet race and class each have their own powerful dynamics, which, while they may compound one another, are by no means identical. The struggles in each of these districts – and the powerful vestiges of them that persist – were about race, not class. It is likely that, at some point in the reform process, RSOs will require the capacity to raise and deal with this issue and to engage the sensibilities of the district and community about it.

Making It Work

6. The superintendent's vision must animate the district/RSO relationship; without this vision and a continually evolving and shared understanding of how the RSO's efforts further it, the reform will not succeed.

Regardless of whether their RSO partners were local or imported, all the superintendents understood and strongly argued that the vision of reform they were implementing in collaboration with the RSO must be their own if it is to be successful. RSOs can be critical sources of information for superintendents and other district leaders – ensuring that they have the most up-to-date research on best practices and effective policies and helping to shape their vision and enhance it – but the vision must originate with and be owned by the superintendent. In some cases, that vision may flow from the superintendent directly; in other instances, the district leader may internalize and adapt essential components of an RSO approach and mold it to an evolving vision of reform.

In Durham, WOW provided a shared language and "harnessed innovation and creativity across the district toward the same goal"; the goal, however, was set by Denlinger, who constantly and personally monitored progress toward reaching it. Ray Daniels in Kansas City saw FTF in a similar light – it was not a "magic bullet" that would save the system but an educationally sound approach to teaching and learning that could build district capacity to realize the vision he and the school board had created and refined. He did not hesitate to adapt suggestions by IRRE to fit this vision – taking what aligned with his view and rejecting what did not. Register in Hamilton County was equally firm in his conviction that the superintendent must be the source of the reform and is ultimately responsible for its success. His RSO partner, Dan Challener, president of the Public Education Foundation, concurred. PEF's role was to assist Hamilton County Public Schools in its efforts to reform itself, through specific programmatic initiatives and through comprehensive strategies to build its capacity – PEF "stokes the engine of reform; it doesn't drive it." As the district's needs changed and new opportunities arose, largely due to philanthropic recognition of the relationship between PEF and HCPS, the RSO's role as supporter of reform remained constant, though the means by which it fills that role evolved.

Cleveland offers a similar scenario. Among Byrd-Bennett's first steps upon her arrival were to build a vision for the district and craft a plan for realizing it. Working toward the CEO's objectives has changed dramatically the relationships with RSOs that long supported, and in many instances paved the way to, reform. While many of the RSOs may not have agreed with Byrd-Bennett's opinion on how they should be structured, and many believed that, in the long run, the consolidation of nonprofit groups working with the district may adversely affect progress in the district, each organization realized that the core value of its work was in helping to realize the vision contained in the CEO's plan.

This realization reflected, in part, another powerful reality in district/RSO relationships – that without the support of the superintendent, an RSO's efforts are doomed. It is not possible to provide meaningful support to a district if district leadership rejects it. RSOs may continue relationships with individuals in the central office or in school buildings but these will essentially fly under the district's radar and will, in all likelihood, not fly too far. District cooperation will not be forthcoming and funders interested in systemic reform may be reluctant to support a "reform" effort that, without district approval, will be little more than a limited sideshow.

District/RSO collaboration is in essence a collaboration around a leader's vision and goals. RSOs may (and do) provide important input in creating the vision and establishing the goals, but they are reform *support* organizations. To be successful, RSOs must understand the varied forms that support takes in the constantly shifting context in which the district works.[22] Acting on this understanding is a core competence of any RSO.

7. Resistance to reform is always present; superintendents must unequivocally associate themselves with the reform and continually embrace the implementation strategies of the RSO.

Change is unsettling and, in an era of high-stakes accountability, educators are being asked to make changes almost continuously. Too often, moreover, these requests for change are not accompanied by a thoughtful rationale or well-developed strategies. Meaningful change for educators – deepening content knowledge, expanding pedagogical skills, working collaboratively, and assuming increasing responsibility – is also hard. It demands considerable time, energy, and will. In the face of this, reform in each district in the study – that is, changing what teachers do and how they do it – was initially met with skepticism and resistance. These negative reactions were overcome, at least in part, by district leadership – specifically by superintendents' visible commitment to the reform.

In each district, some teachers and administrators quickly embraced reform, often because what the superintendents were proposing reflected their own hopes for education. Others were slower in accepting reform, but, understanding that the superintendent's actions demonstrated her commitment to reform, realized that it was genuinely valued in the district. Regard for the initiative meant that leadership would provide consistent support to staff working to implement it.

Continued demonstration of commitment by the superintendent swayed many educators to adopt reform. But in each district, some teachers and administrators continued to resist change. In these instances, superintendents were willing to demand change. When members of his central office staff were slow to comply with a request for data from PEF, Register insisted that they share the data promptly. When several of the high school planning teams for the Carnegie Corporation's Schools for a New Society initiative were lagging in the planning process, he made it clear that the plans were the district's priority and required their immediate attention and action.

Recognizing the pivotal role of the superintendent, the school board in Kansas City, when searching for a new superintendent in the second year of implementing FTF, questioned candidates on their beliefs about and willingness to continue FTF. The candidate the board selected, Ray Daniels, had been assistant superintendent in the district and involved in the development of its overall reform plan, of which FTF was an integral part. Daniels was not only willing to continue FTF; he saw opportunities to deepen it across the district.

One way to signal leadership commitment to reform and impatience with resistance is to replace noncompliant staff. In Durham, Denlinger replaced building leaders whom she regarded as not sufficiently supportive of the work. Staff changes and recent changes at the building level in Kansas City demonstrated leaders' support for those advocating reform and less tolerance for resistance to it.

[22] One of the factors that leads to a shift in context is the relationship between the district and the RSO, which may itself lead to changes in the superintendent's vision. Also, see footnote 8 for a discussion of the need to avoid considering the "supporting" relationship in purely hierarchical terms.

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8. Superintendent leadership and district buy-in is not enough; comprehensive efforts to involve all stakeholders (board, community, families, and unions) must begin early and continue throughout the reform work.

Schools are community institutions. Although direct responsibility for schools rests with the superintendent and the district, others across the community are deeply connected to schools, whether directly linked to them or not. The failure to gain stakeholder acceptance of change, if not approval and support for it, can doom a district's reform effort.

The first step that Kansas City Kansas Public Schools and its RSO partner IRRE took to develop a strategy for implementing FTF was to facilitate roundtables among diverse groups of stakeholders, including the teachers' union. At these roundtables, KCKPS and IRRE staff explained in detail the challenges facing the district and the urgent need to respond to them and introduced FTF as a sound strategy for doing so. The roundtables also allowed stakeholders to ask questions, make suggestions, and clarify their roles and responsibilities for supporting reform.

Communication with stakeholders remained a priority with KCKPS administration after the roundtables, which helped maintain community support and momentum for reform. Representatives of the teachers union not only participated in the roundtables but also met monthly with the district administration to discuss issues that were important to either group. The reform effort was usually high on the agenda. Among other things, the union representatives shared feedback from teachers about reform – what was working well and what was not – and administration officials shared information about next steps and solicited feedback. In large part because of this deliberate and regular communication, the teachers' union became a partner in reform, not a hurdle to be overcome.

Flint Community Schools had a different experience. The superintendent, James Ray, recognized early that communication, both internally with teachers and administrators and externally with the larger community, was critical. As a result, he developed collaborative processes for planning and implementing reform and established mechanisms for sharing information about reform throughout the district and community. In some schools these mechanisms worked well but in others they did not.

Ray established the Leadership Council, which was composed of 180 people from throughout the community, including three representatives from every school, to develop a reform vision and plan and help oversee its implementation. The council met regularly over a year, and school representatives on the council were charged with keeping their school-site colleagues informed about the council's progress and with sharing feedback from them with the council. Some school representatives did so diligently; many others, however, were less careful, leaving their colleagues with little knowledge about the reform plan or the rationale behind it. In part as a result, while many teachers saw exciting possibilities in reform, many other teachers proved to be ignorant of it or fiercely resistant to it and actively worked against it. Some teachers lobbied the school board against it, and one former district employee ran for the board, successfully, by campaigning against reform. This contributed greatly to growing tension between Ray and the school board, which eventually led to his resignation.

In Cleveland, the CEO was deliberate about her desire to change how the school district related to RSOs. At her request, funders convened a group of national consultants to review the district's relationships with RSOs and to make recommendations

about how these relationships might be restructured to conform to her thinking about the appropriate role for support organizations in transforming the system. The consultants' report provided a means for the CEO to maintain discussion about these relationships. She continued to engage funders, RSO representatives, and other community leaders. These conversations were ultimately followed by a "white paper" that set forth her view that consolidating the RSOs was, for her, the most effective way to proceed. While support for her position was far from unanimous, the CEO engaged significant stakeholders in redefining the relationship between the district and multiple RSOs. In so doing she successfully made a case for change in the way RSOs were configured and in the way they related to the district and tied support for her position to support for vision of reform.

9. The superintendent cannot function in isolation; she must empower district staff to champion and help drive the reform.

The superintendent is the leader of and spokesperson for reform; she steers the boat but cannot propel it alone. In every district, key central office staff members have pushed the work of reform on a day-to-day basis. In doing so, they serve as the primary interface with the RSO. Their work is critical to the success of the relationship and the reform endeavor. Denlinger in Durham assembled a core team who shared her vision of teaching and learning, would work collaboratively, and could assume responsibility for managing components of reform. She also made it clear that, at the school level, she expected principals to drive reform; principals unwilling to do so were removed.

In Hamilton County, Register created the position of assistant superintendent for urban education and named Ray Swofford to it. Swofford was responsible for, among other things, overseeing the Benwood Initiative, the comprehensive effort to transform the district's nine urban and lowest-performing elementary schools. An experienced urban educator, Swofford understood the difficulty of transforming such schools and was hesitant to accept the position. He did so when Register assured him that he would have the resources as well as Register's ongoing support for the effort.

FTF also had a champion in Kansas City, Bonnie Lesley, who was then associate superintendent. She led the design team that created the plan to implement FTF and assumed responsibility for executing it. Her enthusiasm for the work in combination with her authority pushed FTF forward, even when teachers and other administrators resisted it. Lesley eventually left the system. With her departure, Steve Gering became the district's point person for reform. Today there are four executive directors to whom all building personnel within each of the four clusters report. Gering is one of these but is viewed by many as having substantial responsibility for the reform and the authority – some of it informal – to drive the reform.

Flint Community Schools also had a reform champion, Linda Caine-Smith, the deputy superintendent for administrative and learning support services. Caine-Smith was responsible for the day-to-day management of the reform and was one of its greatest advocates within the system.

These and other individuals, who sometimes were assistant, deputy, or associate superintendents and sometimes had other titles, had key responsibilities for the reform process. Nurturing and maintaining the district/RSO relationship was a central part of their work, even though it was not always formally part of their jobs. They met and talked with RSO leaders often and supported the work of the imported organizations on their visits to the district.

They communicated with central office staff, building leaders, and instructional staff about progress and monitored interim outcomes. They promoted the reform within the district and employed a variety of strategies to overcome pockets of resistance to the RSO work.

10. RSO approaches to reform often focus either on creating structures or on improving teaching and learning; these are equally important and districts are becoming more cognizant of how one should lead to the other.

Although every RSO shares the same long-term goal, better student outcomes, their individual expertise usually lies in one of several areas: management and finance, the infrastructure of reform, or building teacher knowledge and skills. Different expertise leads to different emphases and, for reform to be systemic, it is critical that the district realize that work in one area must be connected to plans for improving the others. This may sometimes involve working with more than one organization.

In Flint, the Busara Group helped district personnel think about and create a management structure – the prototype central office – that would effectively guide and support the implementation of the Explorer Schools, which were configured to be small learning communities. Busara was rarely involved in issues of teaching and learning; the district relied on another partner, the Panasonic Foundation, for assistance in this area. CLSR takes the opposite approach; its focus is primarily on strengthening teaching and improving learning. This has not hindered reform in Durham because Denlinger, prior to establishing the partnership with CLSR, began addressing some of the structural needs of the district, such as its financial systems, and has continued this focus. Though formally outside the DPS/CLSR partnership, her participation in BellSouth's Superintendents' Network, operated by CLSR, provided Denlinger with information about building infrastructure to support effective teaching and learning.

IRRE, through experience, has learned to bridge the spectrum of reform requirements. Its initial focus in Kansas City was on creating the structures or conditions necessary for reform to be implemented and sustained. The core component of this was the Small Learning Communities (SLCs), which, by design, required collaboration among and reflection on their practice by teachers. Mechanisms such as School Improvement Facilitators were put in place to support the SLCs. For a number of reasons (among them the early insistence of the district on creating and managing the strategies to improve instruction, changes in instructional leadership in the district, disagreements about how the instructional critical features of FTF should be implemented, and IRRE's lack of experience with and authority to provide definitive approaches to instructional improvement), the partnership has lagged in launching systematic and focused supports for instructional change when compared to its progress in moving toward structural change.

While some important indicators of student outcomes have been positive, the district has not seen much improvement in students' achievement scores, especially those measured by high-stakes testing. IRRE and KCKPS have realized that creating the conditions for improved teaching does not, in itself, lead to better teaching; teachers need meaningful learning opportunities to deepen their knowledge and improve their skills. They are working together to provide these opportunities. The recent grant from the Kauffman Foundation, which extends the partnership, will enable the district and the RSO to explore these opportunities more deeply.

11. There has been little focus on assessing the contributions of both local and imported RSOs in improving student achievement; this is beginning

to change as districts feel increased pressure as a result of new standards and as RSOs become more reflective about their work.

Each RSO utilized some form of evaluation to monitor its work with its partner district. The Busara Group uses the scope of work in its contracts with districts to determine if it has fulfilled its commitment. CLSR solicits feedback through survey instruments and regular meetings with central office personnel to ensure that their trainings are effective. Neither organization, however, attempts to assess its work in light of the districts' student-achievement goals – whether it has contributed to the district's progress and, if so, how it has done so.

CLSR, in response to queries from clients, is now expanding its assessment of how its approaches fostered change. As part of its focus on developing engaging work for students, the organization is developing tools whereby students in all grade levels can provide feedback about how engaged they are in classroom work. CLSR is also developing additional mechanisms whereby teachers can similarly judge how engaged students are.

PEF tracks its processes (e.g., how many teachers participate in the Critical Friends Groups) and outcomes (e.g., whether teachers value their participation in the groups and whether it has, in their own estimation, improved their teaching). This is valuable information. But PEF's president is moving the organization toward more rigorous evaluations. Increasingly, PEF is setting quantifiable goals for student outcomes in its work. Both the Benwood Initiative and the Schools for a New Society initiative have set specific goals for student achievement. Challener believes that PEF's success, as much as that of the district, will be determined by whether or not those goals are reached. The push toward more rigorous evaluation comes from Challener's belief that PEF must be held to the same level of accountability as the district.

Ongoing assessment is the basis of the theory of change that undergirds ETF and, according to IRRE staff, it is essential to transforming schools. According to IRRE, evaluation "should begin with a set of expectations about how reform is going to be initiated (early outcomes), and continue with whether and how well it is being implemented and what the initial effects on students' and teachers' experiences are (intermediate outcomes), and with whether it is producing change in 'high-stakes' assessments of academic performance and student behavior (long-term outcomes)." In the planning process, a research management team was established to conduct an independent evaluation of the Kansas City partnership. With operational support from the research management team, IRRE staff and the KCKPS design team identified specific indicators for the outcomes they sought to reach and determined a time frame for reaching them. The desired outcomes range from improved academic performance to better relationships among teachers and students to greater and more meaningful community involvement. The indicators for these outcomes include reading and math achievement test scores; student attendance, persistence, graduation, and suspension rates; use of demonstrated best practices in instruction as evidenced by survey, observation, and student reporting; increased communication between teachers and parents; and increased participation of parents in supporting their children's learning. Two recent reports on the early outcomes of ETF in several sites are now available (Gambone et al. 2002; Quint 2002).

New efforts at evaluation reflect higher stakes for districts and increased attention to the work of RSOs in promoting long-term reform. Districts committed to long-term reform understand that the outcomes from working with RSOs may not initially align with performance goals on standard-

ized tests. This realization must be communicated to other education stakeholders in a way that also provides tangible evidence of positive outcomes. Both partners are learning that if district/RSO efforts are going to be sustained, expectations about interim results must be established at the time of engagement. What is being evaluated, how it is to be evaluated, and how the evaluation is to be used should be decided at the start of the relationship.

12. Local RSOs are continually challenged to develop new capacities to meet changing district needs; imported organizations constantly work to add value as their reform takes hold in districts.

Relationships between RSOs, local or imported, and their partner districts are never static. They shift in response to internal changes in either organization – for example, a new superintendent or new RSO director – and to external changes – for example, new legislation or new funding opportunities.

Regardless of why relationships change, RSOs must continually prove their worth. Proof takes different forms. Local RSOs have a continuing relationship with the district. To be effective, their capacities must evolve as district needs change in response to changes in context. Imported RSOs are usually engaged to help carry out a specific reform. As this reform is introduced, the RSO must utilize existing capacity or develop new capacity to deal with the changes that the reform has produced and demonstrate that it can continue to add value in the context of the reform.

The work of local RSOs changes significantly over time. Often this is tied to the development and implementation of new programs. The ability to seize opportunities to conceive and carry out promising initiatives requires increased capacity – in probing and understanding need, in explaining to the district why a proposed initiative can make a difference and is worth an investment of the district's time, in marketing a proposal for the effort, and in implementing it. While some of these capacities (grant writing, for instance) are generic, many need to be developed and targeted to specific opportunities.

The local RSOs included in this study have demonstrated an ability to meet changing district needs. In Cleveland, which has experienced tremendous upheaval in the past decade, each of the RSOs has evolved as the district changed and as its needs shifted significantly. The Cleveland Initiative for Education has undergone a fundamental transformation in the twelve years since its founding. Originally designed primarily as an umbrella organization for the area's local RSOs and as a fund-raiser for them, it now dedicates most of its resources to building the skills of the district's leaders and teachers as well as mobilizing business support for education. Among other things, CIE manages the Cleveland Teachers Academy, a collaborative initiative of the teachers' union, the district, CIE, and several local universities, and it operates multiple leadership programs including a summer institute for principals and a year-long academy for assistant principals. CIE also offers several programs that link businesses to schools through various means, including fund-raising, facilities support (cleaning and renovating schools), and mentoring and tutoring programs. CIE's evolution and the support it has garnered from key elements in the community made it the most powerful RSO in the district. The CEO requested that it expand its mission and its activities and work closely with the district. CIE's designation as the "preferred" RSO raises additional challenges for the organization – can it once again meet the demands that arise from a changed context and meet the district's expectations?

Another Cleveland RSO, the Institute for Educational Renewal, has undergone a similar progression

in its work, reflecting an expansion of its capacity. Its original focus was on strengthening the skills of teachers as a means for improving student outcomes. IER is now providing comprehensive assistance to schools engaged in whole-school change and is also working on the development and implementation of curriculum standards at the request of the district CEO. IER chose not to participate formally in the RSO merger requested by the CEO, but still works closely with the district. The experiences of CIE and IER are not unique; each of Cleveland's RSOs went through similar changes.

The Public Education Foundation in Hamilton County has greatly enhanced its capacity as new opportunities have arisen. In its earliest years, PEF's approach to improving education in the Hamilton County Public Schools, which served primarily white suburban and rural students, and Chattanooga City Schools, which served primarily African American students, was limited to discrete programs. That began to change when Chattanooga voters decided to merge their schools with the county schools.

Merger was a momentous decision for the community and one that generated considerable tension. The leadership at that time of the county system viewed the merger as a challenge of logistics – how to meld the infrastructure, such as administration, busing, and human resources, of the city system into that of the county. PEF, however, saw the merger in a different light; it viewed the merger as an opportunity to transform a mediocre county system and a poor city system into a unified system striving toward excellence. It seized an opportunity that became available as a result of a dramatic contextual change.

PEF continues to be opportunistic. It has led in developing curriculum standards and in facilitating their implementation. Introducing and maintaining ongoing programmatic initiatives such as the Critical Friends Groups and the Community Campaign for Student Success have helped establish its credibility within the district, build a good relationship with school and central office staff, and develop expertise about practice and community needs that has informed current comprehensive reform efforts targeting elementary and high schools. The scope of PEF's work is now so broad and so deep that the organization is reluctant to take on new initiatives until it feels it has increased capacity – human and infrastructural as well as financial – to undertake new efforts.

Imported RSOs also find that their efforts in a district evolve. IRRE approached its work in Kansas City not only as a provider of technical assistance but as a reflective learner so that it can best serve its partner districts and inform the broader field of education reform about successful practice. Its initial focus in implementing FTF was on creating the structures of, or conditions for, reform. As school clusters built these structures and adapted them to their own environments, the district and IRRE began to focus on improving instruction. As they did so, both recognized that IRRE did not have the expertise in instruction to take reform to its next step. As a result, IRRE initiated a partnership with Kagan Cooperative Learning, a research-based professional development provider that will work with educators on improving instruction. At the same time, IRRE is also taking steps to develop its own expertise in instruction while continuing to work closely with the district in implementing structural reforms and driving them deeper.

These efforts involve expanding the initiative. While IRRE researchers have long understood the important role of parents and other family members in students' educational attainment, they did not initially incorporate into FTF specific strategies to strengthen the role of parents and link them directly

to students' school lives. They have since developed the Family Advocate System – a carefully drawn mechanism for ensuring communication between teachers and families and encouraging parental involvement in students' work – which is now being introduced in the district.

CLSR has also continued to develop the tools and learning experiences it provides based upon feedback from participants in Durham as well as from other school districts. One such example is the Principals Institute, which CLSR offered for the first time in the summer of 2001. The Institute is a four-day, intensive academy in which participants undertake concentrated exploration of the fundamental concepts of the WOW framework, the beliefs that underlie it, and the skills school leaders need so they can implement it deeply and sustain change. Principals from Durham Public Schools attended in groups; not only did they expand their knowledge and skills, they also strengthened their relationships with one another, enabling them to function more effectively as critical friends for each other.

The Busara Group has had to wear many hats in Flint as requests for its assistance have arisen, sometimes in dramatic ways and with little warning. Both Busara and Flint Community Schools staff report that while the annual scope of work may be the place where Busara's work began, it has never been where its work ended. Twice, in spring 2000 and winter 2002, FCS faced significant budget shortfalls ($14 million and $24 million, respectively) and had to make painful financial cuts. In both instances, at the request of district administration, Busara collected and analyzed extensive data and developed various models for reducing spending. The district's goal was to cut spending without undermining its reform plan; specifically, it did not want to lay off any teachers. With Busara's assistance, FCS was able to cut the budget in 2000 without any layoffs; it was not able to save every job in 2002. In neither instance was Busara's work on the budget part of its scope of work. When the need arose, the district sought Busara's help and Busara was able to respond.

Each of the RSOs in this analysis responded to what it perceived as shifting district demand. While this speaks to the capacity of the RSOs, it also surfaces an important element of district capacity. Changing demand from a district arises out of recognition of the nature of its need. Evolving demand on the part of some districts may be a sign of maturity and an indication of their capacity to respond effectively to the changes in their environments. Thoughtful analysis on the part of the district about where it is going and what it needs may cause it to seek adjustments in what it expects from RSOs.

Sustaining Reform

13. Systemic reform requires more than the assistance of one RSO, local or imported; districts depend on a wide range of organizations for critical, though not necessarily systemic, support.

Systemic reform is hard work that requires, at a minimum, not only money but also an extraordinary investment of time, energy, and goodwill by many people. Superintendents as well as the directors of the RSOs each stated their belief that districts could not do this alone; their faculty and staff, though well-intentioned, committed, and knowledgeable, did not have the capacity to transform their work and ultimately the district. So great are districts' needs – in scope and depth – that they typically surpass the abilities of one RSO, imported or local, to meet them all.

In Kansas City, as noted above, both the district and IRRE recognized the need for assistance in improving instruction and sought out another partner whose beliefs about teaching complemented the district's reform plan and aligned with FTF.

KCKPS has, in practice, an additional partner in implementing FTF – the Kauffman Foundation. Kauffman's participation in KCKPS's reform goes well beyond that of traditional philanthropic involvement, which typically consists of financial support. Kauffman staff not only connected KCKPS to IRRE, following research on education reform, but they were actively involved in the planning to implement FTF and have continued to participate in meetings, offering feedback and making suggestions.

Flint Community Schools had two organizational partners as well as critical assistance from a Michigan State University faculty member in designing and implementing its reform. While the Busara Group provided extensive help with management and financial issues around reform, the Panasonic Foundation, which is an operating foundation, played a different and significant role in the district. Panasonic worked with district leaders to help build system-level capacities to support high-quality teaching and learning. The Foundation helped develop a district infrastructure for professional development at "prototype schools." Panasonic also worked to build a trusting relationship between district officials and various unions and associations; toward this end the Foundation formed "The Group," leaders who represented these constituencies who met monthly for discussions that were facilitated by Panasonic consultants. In addition, Judy Lanier, then a professor at the MSU School of Education, worked closely with Linda Caine-Smith, FCS associate superintendent, to develop and oversee the reform's implementation. One FCS staff member, who was part of the district's reform design team, characterized Lanier as a codirector of reform with Caine-Smith.

While Durham Public Schools does not have an RSO partner active in promoting and sustaining systemic reform on the level of CLSR, the district does receive assistance from other sources, which has contributed substantially to its progress. DPS has received a $3.2-million grant and assistance from the National Science Foundation to improve math instruction across the district through the implementation of NSF-developed math standards and the provision of comprehensive professional development, which DPS faculty have aligned with the WOW framework. Seven schools are implementing comprehensive reform models through a $1.5-million grant from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. In addition, DPS developed good relationships with local universities, including Duke University, which provided, among other things, technical assistance to schools near its campus.

Cleveland offers a clear example of how the needs of a district may, at times, extend well beyond the capacity of any one RSO. Each of the RSOs in Cleveland developed specific areas of expertise in response to unmet needs they saw at the district and school levels. While these efforts complemented each other, they were, in most instances, not collaborative. In addition, the George Gund and the Cleveland foundations, along with Cleveland Tomorrow, a business-backed group, provided not only extensive financial support to the RSOs and to the district, but also provided sustained leadership at critical junctures. The collective work of local foundations in establishing and nurturing RSOs and in taking a leadership role on reform issues essentially saved a distressed district. Cleveland also experimented with various national RSOs. These included the Education Commission of the States, which assisted the district in creating a management accountability system, and the Council for Basic Education, which provided professional development.

When the new CEO came on board, she developed a comprehensive reform plan and pushed success-

fully for the consolidation of several RSOs into one major RSO. The goal of consolidation was to increase efficiency, monitor activities more easily, focus the work more effectively on the CEO's reform vision, and take back traditional functions the district had previously been incapable of fulfilling. The consolidation has also raised issues of independence and accountability to the community, capacity of the district, and sustainability of the reform through changes in district leadership.

In Hamilton County, the Public Education Foundation is the leading organization in supporting systemic reform. The district, however, receives assistance from other organizations. The Fund for Excellence is a nonprofit fund-raising group that annually helps schools raise funds to be used at their own discretion. The Fund runs several other programs, including the IMAGE program, which helps individual schools and the central office develop and distribute positive messages about education to the local media and public.

In addition, in 2001 Chattanooga's mayor, Bob Corker, established the Community Education Alliance, a group of thirteen business leaders committed to improving the quality of instruction at the nine elementary schools of the Benwood Initiative. In its first year of operation, the Alliance was led by two of the schools' principals, who undertook an extensive teacher recruitment campaign. The Alliance uses bonuses – retention and recruitment bonuses for teachers, salary bonuses for principals, and team bonuses for schools – as incentives.

The types of organizations that can provide assistance to districts and participate in or support the district/RSO partnership vary among the districts. Each superintendent, while valuing the contributions of these organizations and in many instances seeking them out, also acknowledged that they present a risk by potentially pulling the district in different directions. Each has tried to ensure that the work of each RSO or advocacy organization is complementary and that all of it aligns with the district's goal and reform plan.

On the other hand, there is not much evidence of imported RSOs seeking to bond with local RSOs around reform strategies. There may be synergies in both going to scale and sustaining the reform that will become apparent in imported/local RSO collaborations. The district must lead in promoting such collaborations.

14. Sustaining reform is primarily a local endeavor that involves district persistence, local capacity, and adequate resources; in sustaining reform, an imported RSO's greatest value may be its ability to help build local capacity and to ask hard questions about progress.

Partnerships between districts and imported RSOs continue to demonstrate real and very positive impact on districts' capacity to promote reform. These partnerships, however, cannot last forever. This is true even when progress is underway and despite the RSO's willingness to adapt to shifting needs. District transformation can be facilitated by an outside organization but in the end change must take place on the ground over time.

There are, in addition, structural barriers to ongoing interaction between districts and imported RSOs. Partnerships with imported RSOs are expensive, in many cases beyond the budgets of districts; in all of the examples in this analysis, districts were dependent on foundation funds to underwrite the partnerships. Cost is compounded by distance. RSOs may be regular visitors to districts, but regularity is not the same as frequency, and how frequently an RSO is present in a district is most often a function of cost.

A major question for districts concerns their willingness to assume some of the cost of imported RSOs. The Kauffman Foundation has re-funded the

partnership between the district and IRRE. Consequently, the need for the district to rely on its own resources is remote. The superintendent stated that, were funding to dry up tomorrow, he would try to reallocate resources, in addition to those already invested by the district, to cover aspects of the initiative. Other districts were less certain and pointed to state budget cuts and constricted district resources as reasons for their unwillingness to commit, even hypothetically, to maintaining a relationship with an imported organization with their own limited funds.

If district involvement with an imported RSO is by nature of limited duration, how can the reform be sustained? Sustaining a reform means that, in the long run, district leadership must be more committed to the reform than to the relationship. It must signal, as Kansas City has, its understanding that the reform is not just a process, it is at the core of what the district is about. This notion has begun to permeate the school system and is affecting how people think about education in Kansas City.

A theory of resources should accompany the larger theory of change that informs a reform effort. None of the relationships with imported organizations that were examined addressed the resources issue directly. Money was either there (Rockefeller and Kauffman offered the funds if the district won a competition or, in effect, said that it wanted it) or was available to a superintendent who approached a funder (Glaxo Wellcome). Reform may begin this way but, if it is to be sustained, the district must consider what it wishes to continue in the absence of the imported RSO and either budget or seek funds for it.

Even with adequate resources, district persistence alone will not be enough to sustain a reform. Districts engage with outside organizations at least in part because they have recognized that they cannot reform themselves. The reason for this is lack of capacity; at least some of the capacity a district requires is to recognize when and how it has moved off course. Outside help is often needed for this and if it can no longer come from an imported RSO, districts may have to look closer to home.

This suggests an additional role for imported organizations as they partner with districts – building local capacity outside the confines of the school system. As discussed above, many districts work with imported and local RSOs simultaneously. In none of the districts that were examined and that were partnering with imported RSOs was there any direct collaboration between an imported and local RSO. It may be in the district's interest to explore with the imported RSO – and to build into the work – relationships with a local RSO, which may assist in building both will and capacity to sustain the endeavor.

This arrangement may also be in the long-term interest of the imported RSO. Today, in Kansas City and Durham, teachers and administrators stress that one major contribution, if not the major contribution, of the imported RSO after reform has taken hold, is its ability to ask hard questions about progress. A continuing role for the imported RSO may be to look at progress and challenge and support a local organization that has assumed some of the responsibility for working with the district.

15. Measures of interim success vary but include a common language, new roles, and a recognition that what began as an innovation has become a habit of being.

The degree to which either districts or RSOs have articulated specific outcomes – interim or long-term – for students and teachers varies considerably, as do the approaches each RSO takes to gauging progress toward reaching these outcomes. Even when indicators of progress were not explicitly defined, however, district personnel in this study sought similar signs that reform was taking hold.

Having a shared or common language is critical to reform. Educators typically work in isolation from one another, and their perceptions of what constitutes quality teaching, shaped in large part by their own education, vary. In Durham, Denlinger had a vision of dynamic and engaging teaching but did not feel she could easily articulate it to ensure that everyone across the district would grasp her vision and move toward the same goal. The WOW framework did that – it conveyed clearly her vision of teaching and learning and laid out a pathway for educators to get there. Faculty and staff in Durham repeatedly reported that the WOW framework gave them a shared language and facilitated meaningful collaborations among them. Now, when teachers and principals speak of engaging student work, they have a common understanding of what that means and what its characteristics are – something that they could not have been sure of previously.

Many educators in the districts spoke of assuming new roles. Some of these were formally defined, such as teachers' participation in the school-level design teams that planned and oversaw the implementation of the Small Learning Communities in Kansas City. PEF, through its Standards Support initiative, has helped two teachers in every school in Hamilton County become Standards-Support Teachers (SSTs), experts in and facilitators of standards implementation. So effective were the SSTs that the superintendent created similar positions – Consulting Teachers – for the central office curriculum and instruction staff. They no longer spend their time in the central office; each is assigned to groups of schools to provide on-site instructional support.

Other new roles were informally developed and grew out of an expanded vision of learning that the reforms were meant to cultivate. Administrators in Flint spoke of a group of teachers in one elementary school who had been energized by the reform. They had been invigorated by the chance to work together, devoting much time to collective learning by, among other things, examining each other's work, seeking out and sharing new information, and by reviewing students' work. Even if the reform were halted, they said, they would never want to return to working alone. The role of each as a teacher had grown to encompass being a researcher, a creator, a collaborator, a communicator, an advocate, a leader, and a learner.

Every district looked for signs that what began as reform was becoming "business as usual." Staff in Durham spoke of the distinction between teachers for whom WOW became the lens through which they viewed their work and those who saw it merely as a program – a project that remained separate from the rest of their work. Reform leaders in Kansas City sought the same – teachers taking ownership of their schools, taking responsibility for the schools' strengths and weaknesses.

16. Most RSOs "push" the district to reform; the potential contributions of advocacy organizations that "demand" reform also require attention and support.

The RSOs in the study all have worked closely with districts to build capacity. Imported organizations operate pursuant to agreement to establish processes and deliver products that will move a district along a mutually understood path to reform. If they see weaknesses in the district or have criticisms, these are pointed out privately or presented as questions in the give-and-take that is part of structured interactions with district personnel. It is not the role of these organizations to hold districts accountable or to demand reform in ways other than that established by their undertaking with the school system. To do so would threaten their viability.

Local RSOs are often in a more ambivalent position in their relationships with districts. Many of them trace their origins to a volunteer group of citizens

eager to improve education in their community's schools. The improvement process often depends on identifying needs and offering solutions; in communities, need often is associated with underperformance by, or weakness in, the district. Local education reform organizations sometimes find themselves in difficult positions as they attempt to address shortcomings in the district. Dependent on good relationships with the district to carry out their work, they are reluctant to be cast as public critics of the system.

In Hamilton County, the Public Education Foundation, while most frequently using strategies to push the district to reform, does at times use "pull" or demand strategies. Through its Teacher Quality Initiative, PEF collected and analyzed data in four areas that affect the quality of teaching, particularly in schools that serve predominantly low-income students: high concentration of novice teachers, low substitute availability, increasing numbers of uncertified teachers, and high teacher turnover. The Foundation found that the nine lowest-performing elementary schools had a substitute availability of only 54 percent; across the district, substitute availability was 79 percent, and in some schools serving primarily middle- and upper-income students, it was even higher. PEF compiled its findings in a report, which it released to the media; prior to doing so, however, the Foundation had shared its findings with Register. Partly in response to the report, Register hired twenty permanent substitutes to serve these schools.

The scenario in Cleveland has evolved with changes in the district. When the system was in great distress and taken over by the state, there was little disagreement about its failures and RSOs felt free to point them out as they struggled to provide outside assistance to the district. With the advent of the new CEO, public criticism has diminished as most RSOs sought to align their work with her vision.

One exception is *Catalyst*, an independent periodical that reports on education issues and comments on what it sees as unresolved issues, successes, and faults in the system. It does not provide services to the district and is not an RSO as such, but it plays a unique role because it offers continuing criticism (that is not unfriendly) from outside the system. *Catalyst* is committed to reform but maintains distance from the system and its leaders. It has been supported by many of the funders that provide resources to the district and the external organizations. *Catalyst* was at first seen by the CEO as potentially helpful to her as she tried to move the system. Relations between the periodical and the system have cooled, but *Catalyst* has maintained its reputation among knowledgeable observers of education in Cleveland for making useful contributions to the ongoing discussion around the direction of reform.

Different experiences in Cleveland and Hamilton County raise questions about the scope of reform support organizations. Those in this study seek to support the district by providing a needed "push" or boost to the reform process. There is also room – and need – for local organizations that demand or "pull" a district to change. These organizations require distance from the district, and they also need resources to find facts and disseminate information to education stakeholders and the community. In Cleveland, funders concerned about reform supported *Catalyst* while responding to the greater needs of the system.

It remains an open question whether reform support organizations that seek to work with districts can also provide the community with continuing critical information about the district that goes beyond widely available information such as test scores. The district may see such activities as a breach of trust. Similarly, there are elements of the

community who may also find it difficult to trust an organization that is working to monitor district performance if the same organization is collaborating with the district on several projects.

Reforming Relationships: A Guide for District Leaders

Partnerships between RSOs and school districts are about change. They are established because the district leader realizes that it is in the district's interest to do something new or to do something differently and that the success of the enterprise depends on building or enhancing the district's capacity. Sometimes this realization is a product of a leader's reflection about appropriate strategies to transform the system. In other instances, an idea originates elsewhere and the district is approached by an RSO or by a third party – often a funder – to join with it in an effort that will add value to the district.

In many cases, the district leader also realizes that the district cannot, on its own, develop the capacity she envisions, so she seeks assistance in reaching her goals. Alternatively, participation in a capacity-building enterprise developed or promoted by a funder may require partnering with an RSO. In either instance, a relationship between a district and an RSO is born.

As this analysis suggests, district/RSO relationships vary greatly. They begin ambivalently, characterized by both hope and skepticism, and each pursues a unique path to change. As different as each relationship is, however, promising partnerships display common indicators of trust that lead to risk taking and set the stage for real improvement in even the most challenged school systems.

Establishing the conditions for transformation is a joint and shared responsibility of both the district and the RSO. However, regardless of the coherence of an approach, the magnitude of investment by a funder, and the expertise and abilities of an RSO, a reform will not penetrate deeply into a system without the focused commitment and active support of the district leader. For change to occur the leader's commitment must be to the possibilities inherent in the reform; her support for the RSO recognizes its role as an agent of a capacity-building process that will, in many instances, continue after the district/RSO relationship is concluded. RSOs can develop and own a ***means*** to reform – ideas, processes, tools; the district, beginning with its leader, must own the reform itself.

Owning the reform and facilitating the RSO's work in fostering it requires both reflection and action on the part of district leadership. Because the relationship between the district and an RSO is not static and is itself characterized by continuous change, what leadership must consider and act upon will evolve during the process.

The guide that follows grows out of the analysis described in this paper of common factors that affect district/RSO relationships. It provides a series of questions that district leaders may wish to ask as they consider and enter into engagements with RSOs, as the relationship takes hold and matures, and as they seek to sustain the reform that is a product of the relationship. Many of the questions may also be relevant to reform support organizations and adaptable for their use.

District leaders themselves are the best judges of what will promote reform in their districts. The guide is offered as a template that can and should be modified to address the unique circumstances of individual district/RSO relationships.

Before Engagement

- Do we have a comprehensive vision of reform?
  - What is it?
  - Who knows what it is (in the central office; in the schools; in the community)?
- Have we articulated our goals?
  - How?
  - To whom?
  - What data demonstrate the need for these goals?
  - Who is familiar with it?
- What kind of help do we need in reaching our goals?
  - From whom?
  - To do what?
  - For how long?
- What do we know about the RSO? Does it have the capacity to work with us and to meet our needs?
  - Do we know the RSO's approach to/philosophy of reform and its areas of expertise?
  - Do we know how closely the RSO adheres to its approach or philosophy?
  - Have we seen evidence of its effectiveness?
- How well does the RSO's approach or philosophy match the district's goals and vision?
  - Have we worked together before? Have we been satisfied with the work and the relationship? Are we entering this relationship for reasons other than promoting reform (e.g., connections with the organization, the RSO's or district's fund-raising needs, pressure from an important constituency)? Who from the district and RSO will be most involved? Can they work together effectively?
  - Could we describe to a teacher, parent, or community leader why we think a relationship with the RSO is right for us?
- Is there a third-party funder involved in establishing the partnership?
  - If not, how is this effort to be paid for? Is there a fund-raising plan? Who is responsible for its implementation?
  - If so, what is the role of the third-party funder? Is it active or passive? For how long is the commitment? What is the funder's demand on district resources?
- Who else do we need to involve in creating support for the reform?
  - Who should be informed about or have input into our decision to engage the RSO (the board, unions, parents, the community, students)?
  - At what stage should they be involved? Do we want to seek input in order to make a good decision or market what we believe to be the right decision?
  - Where will resistance to the relationship or the reform plans come from? How can it be diffused? What are the respective roles of the district and the RSO in dealing with resistance?
  - Are there other organizations, such as business groups, unions, child advocacy groups, and service delivery organizations, that can add value to the partnership? If so, how can these capacities be used?
  - What should the district do to market the reform to outside stakeholders?
- What do we expect from our engagement with the RSO?
  - Can we develop a written statement of expectations?
  - Are these expectations aligned with what the RSO is to deliver?
  - Are these aligned with the expectations of third-party funders?
  - Do we need to consider the expectations of any other stakeholders? Who are they?

- What outcomes are we looking for? How will we monitor progress?
  - What are the time frames for these outcomes? Which are interim and which are long-term?
  - Is the timeline reasonable given the district's current capacity?
  - How will these outcomes be measured?
  - What data will we need to measure outcomes? How will these data be collected? By whom?
  - With whom will this information be shared? Is there a plan to disseminate information about the reform and its outcomes to internal and external stakeholders?
  - What will happen if the hoped-for outcomes do not occur? Is there a way to make adjustments in what we are doing and how we are doing it?
- What structural and policy changes are needed?
  - What staff, if any, need modified job descriptions or reassignments to work on this joint effort?
  - Does the relationship rely on any changes to policy or practice that need to be approved by the school board? That require contractual modifications?

Implementation, Progress, and Outcomes

- What are we learning about our progress?
  - As we reflect on the assumptions that guided our engagement, which seem to be correct? Which were incorrect and why?
  - Are the necessary relationships being established and are the planned activities happening?
  - How has the context in which we are working changed (e.g., new board members, change in budgets and state policies, results on standardized tests, changes in district or RSO staffing)?
  - Based on our continuing assessment, what needs to change in the district/RSO relationship or the work itself? Do we need new indicators of progress?
- Is there qualitative evidence that the reform is taking hold?
  - Is a common language emerging about the reform?
  - What are we hearing and seeing about changes in practice and/or structure?
  - Are other stakeholders aware of the effort and referring positively to it?
  - Is the reform spreading beyond the "first wave" (schools, clusters) of implementation?
  - Is leadership for the reform emerging from central office, building, and instructional staff?
  - Are educators talking about or taking on "new roles"?

Sustaining the Reform

- Are we planning for the future?
  - What elements of the reform do we wish to maintain?
  - What outside support will we need to maintain them?
  - Is there local capacity to provide this support?
  - How will we fund these elements?
  - What other elements do we need to address?
  - Do we need additional support from another organization?
- Should the reform relationship between the district and the RSO continue? If so, how could it be improved?
  - Is there stakeholder support for continuing the reform?
  - Is there sufficient capacity in the district to internalize the effort?
  - Are there local organizations that can add value to this work?
  - Have we provided sufficient support for the next stage of the endeavor?

Extending the Exploration

Reforming Relationships surfaces findings from a scan of twenty-four diverse RSOs and a deeper analysis of the work of several of them in five districts. The scan, the analysis, and the findings set the stage for further investigation of these organizations, their work, and the complex and shifting relationships they establish and maintain with school systems. Among the opportunities for investigation are more extensive looks at both local and imported RSOs, further consideration of the role of funders as reform support organizations and as supporters of organizations that undertake reform, and more focused attention on how RSOs and districts can more directly confront some of the issues of race that so powerfully affect the context in which reform is attempted and which have been for the most part avoided.

Whether an RSO is local or imported greatly affects all aspects of its relationships with districts. This report analyzes the efforts of a small number of both types of organizations. Their stories are not necessarily reflective of all RSOs. While the distinction between local and imported RSOs is a critical tool for understanding their relationships with districts, the difference among RSOs within each cohort is also significant.

So, too, is the difference between what we have defined as RSOs and those local groups with specific programmatic interests in education that do not meet our definition of a reform support organization. Most, if not all, urban districts contain several of these groups that collaborate or wish to work with the district or specific schools in it. Vast contextual differences among districts and the staggering number and variety of these local organizations underscore the need to look at a greater number of districts and their relationships to local RSOs and the relationships between local RSOs and other education improvement organizations. In this regard, it would be interesting to look closely at the nexus between the work of the array of local education organizations and more general efforts to build or promote civic capacity.

Interest in civic capacity leads to questions about the role of organizations that seek to create deeper demand for reform by monitoring the district, developing and disseminating information and ideas, advocating for changes in policy and practice, and engaging segments of the community in sustained efforts to build public will for reform. In demanding reform, these local organizations often adopt a different approach than the local RSOs studied here. Probing the characteristics of these organizations, establishing and testing criteria to measure their effectiveness, and developing recommendations about how they can relate to both the district and the types of local RSOs treated in this report are all potentially fruitful subjects for investigation.

Imported RSOs tend to operate in isolation from one another, partly because there is no established venue in which they can interact and partly because there is some rivalry among them – they are distinguished by strongly held beliefs out of which grow discrete approaches to reform that they market to a finite number of districts. Despite this separation, it seems appropriate to pursue synergies among these groups. These synergies include both concepts and methods. For example, CLSR's emphasis on the centrality of engaging students in meaningful work has had significant impact on the approaches of other organizations. IRRE's devotion to the importance of a reliable theory of change in tracking the connection between structures and learning is influencing other work. Understanding how to connect various approaches employed by different imported RSOs working in multiple districts will not only add to our knowledge about reform, it may prove to be an

important step toward creating a coherent field of reform support organizations.

Among the findings in this report is the need for joint work between local and imported RSOs. Understanding how the efforts of imported RSOs can be better connected to building existing and potential capacity in local organizations to sustain reform will involve considering what characteristics of each RSO and what conditions in the district will induce and maintain these collaborations.

RSO leadership and its relationship to the district deserve further scrutiny. The theories and approaches of each of the imported RSOs in this study were molded by its founder, who actively directs the work of the organization. Theories are modified by context and approaches adjusted by experience. Understanding how this affects the interaction among RSOs and districts and the subsequent work of imported RSOs can help inform districts as they choose partners.

Financial resources are key to any district/RSO engagement and, as we emphasize, these engagements are overwhelmingly dependent on third-party funding, most often from foundations. More work on the knowledge that funders need about these relationships, with some emphasis on developing a theory of change that aligns with district need; the role of foundation staff; and strategies to foster scale and sustainability (especially those that encourage district assumption of some of the costs of the reform) may add value to the work of funders. While there has been some analysis of national funders serving as reform support organizations in multiple districts (Kronley, *Learning from Each Other*, 2000), not much has been undertaken about the role of local or regional funders acting in this capacity. How these funders operate; how much of their work is planned and how much develops in response to changing conditions; what their relationships are with districts, RSOs, and other community stakeholders; how boards support and react to this work; and other related issues are all ripe for investigation.[23]

Finally, race not only matters, but sometimes, in often indirect but not particularly subtle ways, it controls. Every district in this analysis continues to struggle with the legacy of racial discrimination and its effect on student performance, the supply and quality of teachers, the attitudes of administrators, the condition of facilities, and the state of public will to embrace education reform. This legacy is entwined with districts' need to develop the capacity to transform themselves and is consequently at the core of their engagement with RSOs. In many instances, RSO theories of change recognize the need for equity. In some partnerships, this awareness does not extend to implementation strategies that specifically or consistently embrace equity. How and to what extent this makes a difference in reform collaborations should be considered and how more direct approaches to equity might inform the reform enterprise merits more discussion, investigation, and analysis.

These suggestions about future investigation into the complex and evolving relationships between districts and RSOs touch on only a few of the intriguing areas that are ripe for study and analysis. These collaborations are highly contextual and dependent upon the development and deepening of trust between decidedly different entities – a school system and an external organization. The relationships themselves rely substantially on support from outside funders. Successful partnerships are contingent on the ability of district leaders to articulate and

[23] The authors of this study wrote a briefer complementary analysis that looks in more detail at the evolution of the district/RSO relationship in Cleveland and speaks to some extent to the crucial role of funders in supporting reform in that district (Kronley & Handley 2003).

pursue a vision of systemic reform and the skill of reform support organizations in adapting approaches to and uncovering opportunities in the specific setting that each district offers. The collaborations take place in an environment that is neither easy nor steady – education reform is always complicated, often messy, and sometimes exasperating. Despite these obstacles, relationships between districts and reform support organizations are developing appetites and building capacities for systemic reform. They merit continued scrutiny.

About the Authors

Robert A. Kronley is president of Kronley & Associates, which provides advice and assistance to philanthropic organizations, corporations, nonprofit organizations, colleges and universities, state and local governments, and school systems, enabling them to better anticipate and respond to change. Areas of focus include policy analysis, strategic planning, evaluation, and program dissemination.

Some current and recent clients include the Ball Foundation, the BellSouth Foundation, Baptist Community Ministries, the Byerly Foundation, the Center for Leadership in School Reform, the CommunityCare Foundation, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Finance Project, the Joyce Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, McGuireWoods Consulting, the Panasonic Foundation, Prince George's County (Maryland) Public Schools, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Southeastern Council on Foundations, and the Southern Growth Policies Board.

Mr. Kronley has written extensively on education, philanthropy, and public policy. Recent reports include *Inspiring Leadership: A Philanthropic Partnership for Professional Development for Superintendents* and *Southern Synergies* for the BellSouth Foundation; "From Frontier to Field: A Preliminary Scan of Non-University-Based Leadership Programs for Incumbent Superintendents and Principals" for the Wallace–Reader's Digest Funds; *Fighting Poverty, Building Community* for the Council for a Better Louisiana; *Learning from Each Other* for the Clark, Panasonic, and Rockefeller foundations; *Framing the Field: Professional Development in Context* for the Finance Project; and *Miles to Go* for the Southern Education Foundation.

Mr. Kronley received an A.B. from Columbia University and a J.D. from New York University.

Claire Handley is senior associate at Kronley & Associates. Her focus there includes research, data collection and analysis, program evaluation, and strategic planning. Recent projects include work for the Academic Distinction Fund of Louisiana, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Wallace–Reader's Digest Funds, the Center on Leadership in School Reform, the Finance Project, the BellSouth Foundation, and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

She has written on various aspects of education reform and philanthropy. She recently authored *Teaching Matters* for the Academic Distinction Fund and is coauthor of several publications including *Framing the Field: Professional Development in Context* for the Finance Project; *Inspiring Leadership: A Philanthropic Partnership for Professional Development for Superintendents* for the BellSouth Foundation; *Miles to Go* for the Southern Education Foundation; and "Notes from the Field: Higher Education Desegregation in Mississippi," in *Chilling Admissions* for the Harvard University Civil Rights Project.

Ms. Handley received a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan and a master's degree in public policy from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

List of Interviewees

Name	Organization
Hanna Bartlett	Institute for Educational Renewal, Cleveland
David Bergholz	George Gund Foundation, Cleveland
Jacquelynne Borden-Conyers	Flint Community Schools
Maria Boss	Cleveland Scholarship Program
Everly Broadway	Durham Public Schools
Amanda Brown	Public Education Network
Barbara Byrd-Bennett	Cleveland Municipal School District
Linda Caine-Smith	Flint Community Schools
Dan Challener	Public Education Foundation, Hamilton County
Warren Chapman	Joyce Foundation
Debbie Colburn	Hamilton County School Board
James Connell	Institute for Research and Reform in Education
Ray Daniels	Kansas City Kansas Public Schools
Janice Davis	Durham Public Schools
Richard DeColibus	Cleveland Teachers Union
Ann Denlinger	Durham Public Schools
Joseph DeStefano	The Busara Group
Calvin Dobbins	Durham Public Schools
Nancy Dominick	Durham Public Schools
Myrna Elliott-Lewis	Cleveland Municipal School District
Eric Fingerhut	Federation for Community Planning, Cleveland
Steve Gering	Kansas City Kansas Public Schools
Jeff Glebocki	George Gund Foundation, Cleveland
Annie Hall	Public Education Foundation, Hamilton County
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David Hertz	The Busara Group
Nancy Hester	Durham Public Schools
William Hiller	Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, Cleveland
David Hooker	Cleveland Initiative for Education
Deborah Howard	Cleveland Education Fund
George Humphrey	Cleveland Scholarship Program
Barbara Johnson	Flint Community Schools
Charles Joynes	Clifton Elementary School, Hamilton County Public Schools
Mark Kenney	Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Kansas City
Betsy Knott	Hope Valley Elementary School, Durham Public Schools
Marcia LaRiche	Institute for Educational Renewal, Cleveland
Charles Lee	Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Cleveland
Laurie Levin	Institute for Research and Reform in Education
Bert L'Homme	Durham Public Schools
Julie Marshall	Durham Public Schools
Bill McKersie	Cleveland Foundation
William Miles	Public Education Network
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Grayling Williams	Durham Public Schools
Helen Williams	Cleveland Summit on Education
Michael Yarbrough	Durham Public Schools
Sheila Young	Hamilton County Public Schools
Victor Young	The Busara Group

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